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OR,

HARD KNOX, The Rogue-Rancher.

A ROMANCE OF THE
WYOMING RANGE RUSTLERS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE ACT OF A MADMAN.

"CHUCK'LL be ready fer you, time you're
ready fer hit, Kid."

"That's all right, Pap. Don't wait on
me."

"But, I say, boy—"

An impatient gesture cut the sentence
short, and lapsing into silence the old man
watched that slowly-moving figure, his eyes

"WHO ARE YOU?" HE CRIED HOARSELY, REACHING FORTH AND PLUCKING
AWAY THE SABLE MASK.

filled with the wistfully anxious light which one so often notes in the gaze of a faithful dog.

Other eyes were turned in that same direction, just ten, but their curiosity was mixed with a far different sentiment: half anger, half-scorn, unless their faces bore false witness.

"Gittin' turrible top lofty, don't you reckon, pardner?" muttered one of the trio gathered about the little camp-fire where breakfast was well under way, just then.

"Way 'bove his business, 'pears like, fer a fact!"

"Ef I was to git bucked half the high he feels, durned ef I wouldn't count on findin' a bluebird's nest in the slack o' my britches afore I hit the sod ag'in; that's what I would, now!"

"Waal, don't let Old Pap Ryan hyarye say it, pardner, or it's heap sight wuss then sod'll hit yel" with a warning glance toward the veteran. "His sun jest sets an' rises in the Prairie Kid, an' he's p'izener'n a 'side-winder' when it comes to a bite."

The hint was taken as quickly as given, for Old Pap Ryan turned toward the campfire, his wrinkled and weather-beaten visage betraying something of the sore uneasiness which disturbed his mind.

There was something more than uneasiness written upon the face of the Prairie Kid, the Cowboy Chief, as he moved away from the little bivouac in that secluded valley; something that lent the impression of a haunted man, as those big black eyes roved hither and yon, flashing keen glances along the valley or up the rock-rugged hills on either side.

Ordinarily both face and figure conveyed the impression of youth, if not of immaturity; but just now the weight of anxious years seemed resting upon both.

Through that oval valley flowed a fair-sized stream of water, almost large enough to deserve the title of river which was locally given it.

Just there the banks were something more than twenty feet high, nearly perpendicular, the river flowing smoothly, without riffle or rapids until the lower end of the valley was neared.

The Prairie Kid paused for a brief space upon the brink, gazing moodily down upon the bank-shadowed water; then he passed on up the valley, quickening his steps a trifle as though urged on by that growing sense of evil to come.

Only a few rods; then he stopped short with a quick gasp, visibly shrinking as a hand swiftly slipped into his bosom.

"The Vigilantes!"

A moving shape just beyond that narrowed end of the secluded valley; the barest possible glimpse of man and horse; but as by instinct the Prairie Kid divined the truth, and swiftly wheeling he hurried back toward the camp-fire, near which their horses were tethered, all saddled and bridled and ready for flight!

The trio of cowboys were already busy over their morning meal, and even Old Pap Ryan failed to take immediate note of those hurried movements.

Reaching the horses, the Prairie Kid jerked a halter loose, leaped into saddle and dug spurs viciously into quivering flanks, sending the branded mustang swiftly down the valley, paying not the slightest heed to the cries of startled curiosity breaking from his comrades.

Hardly a score strides more were taken by the mustang ere a strong hand and cruel bit checked his flight, jerking him back until his haunches almost brushed the short grass with which the oval valley was carpeted.

Another short gasp, but this time tinged with fierce rage, for again those flashing black eyes glimpsed moving shapes, yonder amidst those rocks and bushes: shapes which he was only too swift to recognize.

"Trapped! Those merciless devils, and—Hardress Knox! Better feel the grip of death than his stern and pitiless hand. Better, far better death than that!"

With his darkest presentiment coming true, and hardly realizing what words escaped his blanched lips, the Prairie Kid wheeled his horse as upon a pivot, right hand once more slipping inside his embroidered flannel shirt, to pluck from an inside pocket a mask of black cloth.

Covering his face with this as he rode, he sped toward the bivouac, shouting as he came:

"To horse, men! The Vigilantes are upon us! Hard Knox and his devils are—Too late!"

Again the snorting mustang was brought to a sudden halt, for even as he spoke the Prairie Kid saw how vain were those words.

Half a score mounted and armed men entered the valley, above, deploying so as to completely block the passage, while a backward glance showed him a similar, yet still more formidable force, coming through the lower defile.

Old Pap Ryan and the three cowboys were already upon their feet and in motion, startled into action by the swift movements of their youthful commander; and they likewise divined the ugly truth as yonder armed force blocked the way.

They sprung across to where their horses were hitched, but, even as hands touched halters, they knew the worst—knew that it was too late for flight, since both ends of the valley were blockaded—knew that fighting was equally out of the question, since they were outnumbered five to one, at the lowest calculation.

As he ran, Old Pap Ryan had jerked revolver from scabbard, but now he thrust the weapon back, at the same time calling to his young chief:

"Easy, Kid! They can't prove nothin' but—"

"Steady, you coyotes!" came a loud, clear call from the larger force of Vigilantes, the speaker forging to the front with armed right hand uplifted to emphasize his commands. "Throw up your hands, or—Halt, I say, you fool!"

Ryan's hand was reaching forth to grasp the reins of his master's horse, but a cruel rake of the spurs sent the branded mustang past the quartette and up the valley, as though its rider hoped to force a passage through the smaller armed force.

The right hand of the Vigilante leader came to a level, his revolver barking viciously, but the Prairie Kid bowed lower in his saddle as the grooved lead hummed past his ears.

"Stop him, men!" thundered Hard Knox, at the same time urging his own mount forward. "Don't let him—Steady, you crazy hound!"

A shrill, anguished cry burst from Old Pap Ryan, and, heedless of his own peril, he sprung after that reckless rider.

Jerking his mustang sharply to the left, the Prairie Kid spurred on, now heading direct for the precipitous bank of the darkly-flowing river!

Turning half-way in the saddle, he flung up a hand as though in mad defiance, shouting a word or two which were lost to all ears save his own in that wild confusion.

"Halt, you lunatic!" again thundered the Vigilante chief, as he came on at top speed. "Halt, or I'll shoot! Take it, then!"

His weapon spoke again, just before the mad rider reached the brink of the sunken river, and with a shrill, far-reaching scream as of mortal agony, the Prairie Kid flung aloft both hands, then horse and rider disappeared from view of all other eyes!

Back to those startled ears came a sullen splash from the hidden river, and strong faces paled at thought of the tragedy just witnessed.

Hard Knox wrenched up his sweating steed, smoking weapon lowering for a moment, a startled cry parting his mustached lips, while his men seemed more or less powerfully affected by that thrilling sight.

The trio of cowboys huddled together near their horses, longing yet fearing to seek safety in headlong flight, covertly fumbling at their armed waists, yet lacking nerve to actually draw the weapons they knew so well how use.

Old Pap Ryan stood like one turned to stone as he saw his loved master ride so madly upon what seemed certain death; but then, as that shrill scream answered back the vicious report of a revolver, a hoarse, choking cry issued from his throat, and staggering almost blindly forward, he reached yonder precipitous bank, paying not the slightest attention to the stern commands which came from lips of armed enemy.

Knox quickly rallied from the brief dismay

into which that totally unexpected ending had cast him, and sternly cried aloud to his men:

"Close in, lads! Don't shoot unless you have to, but—take 'em, one and all!"

As he spoke, the Vigilante leader sent his good steed forward, pistol covering that cowed trio whose heads and legs alone showed from behind that living barricade of horse-flesh.

"Throw up your hands, fellows! We've got you foul, and kicking won't begin to save you! Throw up, or go down!"

"Don't shoot, boss!" quavered a husky voice, as its owner obeyed that hurried command by elevating both hands, empty of weapons. "Don't shoot, for we hain't kick-in'. We never done nothin' which—"

"Oh, button your lip. We'll see whether black's white or green when the proper time comes," impatiently cut in the leader of the Vigilantes as he rode up, eyes flashing across to where Old Pap Ryan was bending perilously far over the river-brink, at the point where that mad rider had vanished from sight a few moments earlier.

"Look to 'em, Kintner, will you?"

"All right, boss."

"Pull their teeth and hopple their hoofs first. I'm going to see what—That crazy fellow!"

Knox made a quick, almost nervous gesture as he turned away from those captives, and there was something beyond the ordinary to be read in his sternly handsome face as he moved toward the spot where the old man was located.

Was he regretting his share in that sudden tragedy, or was that troubled frown born of a still deeper sentiment?

When two-thirds of that short distance had been covered, the Vigilante checked his horse and sprung from the saddle, drawing a pistol as he strode forward, although yonder crouching figure gave no sign or token that his approach was recognized.

"Don't you play the fool, too, old man!" grimly warned the approaching man, as his left hand dropped heavily upon one of those bowed shoulders, only to be cast off by a sudden shake as that almost ghastly pale face turned for an instant that way.

A low snarl hissed through those yellow teeth as Old Pap Ryan recognized the speaker; and then came the fiercely emphasized words:

"Ah-h, ye devil! Look, ye hound of Satan! Look at the foul work your bloody hands have done this bitter, black day!"

Leaning perilously far over the escarpment, Old Pap Ryan pointed downward, where the branded mustang was feebly swimming toward the further shore, just then striking bottom with its feet.

Looking, Hard Knox saw the half-stunned creature weakly floundering on until it fell in an awkward heap, head lying on the ground, just above the water's edge.

Where was the mad rider now?

Keenly those brown eyes flashed over the surface of the river in quest of that masked stranger, but without success.

Living or dead, the Prairie Kid had vanished from sight, and if his life-blood had been shed by that last swift shot, all traces were carried away by the smoothly-flowing waters.

"Where is he?" demanded the Vigilante, as his eyes turned from that vain search to the face of the old man at his side. "What's become of the fool, anyway?"

Old Pap Ryan shivered and shrunk as from a stinging blow, his trembling hands rising to cover face and press upon aching eyes for a brief space; but, he as quickly rallied, facing his captor with fierce hatred showing in face, and flaming in eyes, as he huskily demanded:

"Whar is he? An' you ax that, Hard Knox?"

"Why wouldn't I ask it, when—and you want to answer it, old fellow, too! Where is he, then? Spit it out, or—"

Old Pap Ryan flung out one unsteady hand, pointing downward at the silently flowing river, then huskily breathing the words:

"Whar is he? Gone! Hounded to death by you an' your cussed imps o' hell, Hard Knox! Oh, Kid, Kid! Why didn't ye hear to the ole man when he begged fer ye not to—to—"

Once more he was leaning over the brink, bony fingers twisting at each other as he stared through the gathering mist of bitter grief at the waters now flowing over—what?

To all seeming he had forgotten the presence of his captor, whose lightest words might easily send him across the Dark Divide. He had thoughts only for the loved one who had gone before him.

For once in his life Hardress Knox felt at a loss how to act, what to say; he began to experience something of what Cain must have felt in days of old, although this was by no means the first being who had fallen before his deadly aim or resistless arm.

He gave his broad shoulders an impatient shrug as he cast off those ugly thoughts, roughly muttering:

"He was crazy, or else born a fool! I gave him fair warning, and if he wouldn't take that, it was his the blame, not mine!"

Old Pap Ryan turned that way, thin lips curling back to show his teeth; but it was a voiceless snarl of intense hatred, at first. Then he huskily uttered the words:

"He was white as they make 'em! He was jest a kid—only a weenty bit of a child, like; an' you bloody-murdered him, Hard Knox!"

CHAPTER II.

SENTENCED BY JUDGE LYNCH.

STRONG man and full of hardihood though he was, the Vigilante Chief visibly recoiled from that intently passionate charge, one hand mechanically gripping pistol-butt as though he anticipated a physical attack to follow.

Instead, Old Pap Ryan turned again to the silent waters, blinking rapidly his grief-reddened lids to clear his misty vision, woe-fully searching for what he was fated never to find: the bullet-pierced course of his beloved young master.

The sound of hasty steps came to the ears of Hard Knox, and a hot flush dyed his face as he saw his men hurriedly running that way, no doubt alarmed by his involuntary recoil from the old man.

Rallying, he thrust forth a hand to clutch an arm, sternly saying:

"Talk white, you old idiot! Who was he?"

"Jest a child—jest a weenty kid which—Lord, take him up in both arms! Lord, make his bed in heaven! Oh, boy, why didn't ye listen to yer pore ole Pap when he begged fer ye to—Eh?"

"Who was he, I'm asking you, man?" sternly repeated the Vigilante leader, giving his captive an impatient shake as though to quicken speech. "You call him a child, but if he wasn't full-grown, then I never saw a man in the saddle! Who was he, I ask you?"

The hand left free was brushed swiftly across those sunken eyes, and for a few moments the two men gazed steadily at each other; but then Old Pap Ryan spoke:

"Who was he, you'm askin', Hard Knox? Who was he? The only livin' mortal sech hounds o' hell as you hed left me to love an' live fer! The whitest kid ever tromplin' this footstool! An' now—gone! Shot down like he was a cussed cur ketchin' suckin' aigs! An' you—oh, Lord! I cain't talk—I cain't sca'cely breathe while—I'm comin', Kid! I'm comin'—wait for me, Kid!"

Seemingly crazed by grief, the old man attempted to fling himself headlong over the steep bank; but, dropping his pistol, Hard Knox caught him about the middle with both powerful arms, lifting him clear of the earth, swinging him around to fling him bodily into the ready clutches of his men, just then coming up.

"Don't hurt him more'n you have to, boys!" warned the Vigilante Chief as he stooped for his revolver. "Keep the crazy fool from doing himself harm, though. One such is enough for a day, I reckon!"

"Then it's a sure thing, boss?" asked Joram Kintner, second in command, leaving his subordinates to care for the old man while he peered curiously down at the river, and the now motionless mustang lying there, half-submerged.

"Too mighty sure, I'm thinking," surlily returned the chief. "I'd like to see what's left of him, though!"

"He couldn't have played it for a trick, eh?"

"It's a trick that Satan's trumped, then," with a short, disagreeable laugh as he turned away from the river's bank. "There's no cover in sight, as you can see for yourself, and I was here long before he could have made the turn below, even though he swam like a hungry mink!"

"No; he's dead enough, and unless we can squeeze the truth out of yonder curs, it'll only be blind guessing who he was!"

"A nigger, from his face."

"With the hands of a white man, though! Bah, man; didn't you see? He wore a mask, and that old crank called him Kid!"

"What? Then you really reckon?"

"That we've had our first and last glimpse of the puzzle they call the Prairie Kid; just so!"

Like one who had no wish to press that point further, just then, Hard Knox turned abruptly away, following the men who had conveyed Old Pap Ryan across to the spot where the three cowboys were now lying in bonds, to answer the charges brought against them.

A brief but close scrutiny satisfied the leader that those bonds had been well applied, then he spoke:

"You two fellows stand guard over these gentry, while the rest of you come with me. Fetch ropes, half a dozen of you. And move lively!"

Hard Knox walked back to the river bank, again sweeping that gentle curve of waters with eyes which took note of every ripple, every shadow, every thing which could possibly help to clear away the mystery still enshrouding that move of a madman.

But, all was useless. Yonder lay the branded mustang, still living, though so seriously injured by that crazy plunge as to be unable to help itself further. But, only that; no sign or trace of the reckless rider, living or dead!

Still the Vigilante was not satisfied, and as his men came up with lassoes and trail-ropes in hand, he was the first to grasp one and lower himself over the brink, rapidly descending until he stood at the water's edge, upon that narrow shelf where coarse grass grew sparsely, but where nothing else grew which could afford cover or shelter for a living mortal.

Others descended by similar means, while a few hurried up and down the bank, to reach the river where it entered and left the little valley.

Bidding them search closely for signs of human passage, Knox himself moved slowly along, bending over the water, trying to pierce the clear depths far enough to discover that lifeless carcass in which he felt such a burning interest.

But, it all proved to be labor and time spent in vain. Not the slightest trace of the young cowboy chief could be found, and at the end of half an hour thus expended, there was but one conclusion: his body lay lifeless on the bottom of the river, somewhere in that long curve.

Knox gave the signal to stay the useless quest, and quickly climbed the lariat to the level ground above.

Five minutes later the company of Vigilantes were gathered around the expiring camp-fire under the little clump of trees, against the trunks of which the four prisoners were leaning, in gloomy or dogged silence.

The three cowboys watched each and every movement with poorly-veiled uneasiness, but not so Old Pap Ryan.

His gray head was drooping, his lids closed, his jaws set firmly the better to conceal his intense emotions; but now and then a gasping sigh would escape, and his wiry frame would quiver with grief.

Standing near the prisoners, Hard Knox glanced slowly around over his followers, now gathered in an irregular circle which had the four captives for a center.

All eyes were fixed expectantly upon his face, and as the Vigilante chief saw this, he lifted a hand and removed his slouch hat; an action which was promptly imitated by all present save the four bound men.

The rays of the morning sun entered the oval valley and fell fairly across that tall, athletic figure, and Hardress Knox rarely ap-

peared to better advantage than he did just at that moment.

He stood all of six feet in his high-topped riding-boots, with broad shoulders, swelling chest, thin flanks and long, muscular legs.

His naturally dark brown hair had an iron-gray cast as it fell to his shoulders in slightly curling locks, although its owner had not yet completed his thirty-fifth year of life.

His features were strong, yet more than comely. A heavy mustache covered his upper lip, and a handsome imperial pointed his square chin.

A flannel shirt, with rolling collar and sailor tie; a short riding coat of invisible green velveteen; trousers of gray corduroy, secured at the top by a broad belt or sash of crimson silk, met the spurred boots of fine, soft leather.

After a brief silence, during which his keen eyes passed from face to face of his followers, then rested briefly upon the captives, Hard Knox spoke as follows:

"Friends and neighbors, all! It is hardly necessary for me to speak at length upon this occasion, since each and all of you are quite as fully posted as I am; but I must say just this much:

"For two long years past we, the cattlemen and stock-growers of Wyoming, have been robbed and plundered both right and left! Never a month has passed over our heads without loss by theft in secret, or raid in the open! Never a month, say I? Hardly a week—scarcely a day, for that matter, if you take the range by-and-large!

"For two long and costly years we have stood our losses like men, as best we could, now dropping a thief caught in the act, then stringing up another caught red-handed; but when the books were closed for each year, we had an ugly row of figures to write down on the wrong side!

"That was the way matters ran on for two years, I repeat, but now—how is it? Like this, and ye can bear me out in all I say, gentlemen!

"The thieves have banded together, and openly made their brags that if they can't run this country, no honest men shall! From sneaking in the grass like snakes and coyotes, they come openly and in small armies, shaking their weapons in our faces, threatening us with death if we dare to defend our legal property!

"Instead of scattered bunches, they round up entire herds and drive them to market under the broad sun of midday! If we kick, they shoot; if we fight, they brand us as murderers, assassins, bloodhounds of the law! If we organize and combine, they howl through the papers about mob rule, and appeal for protection by the Government!

"But, why go on? Ye all can testify that I am keeping safely inside the bounds of truth, and that I have not told half I might. But, as I said, where's the use? You know, and these criminals would deny that naked truth with their latest gasp, simply because to admit the honest facts would be to apply the very brand they so richly deserve!"

A low but hearty mutter of grim approval greeted these words, and after a brief pause, Hard Knox spoke further:

"What I have spoken was more for these prisoners than for your enlightenment, friends and neighbors; more to show how well aware we are of their guilt than to justify their arrest; and without further preface I'll come to the main point; what shall be done with these men?"

An irregular chorus answered, some voices calling for death by rope or by bullet, but the majority seemed to be in favor of a sound flogging and banishment from the Cattle Range afterward.

Old Pap Ryan made no sign, uttered no word, but the cowboy trio begged for mercy, even while protesting their innocence, until their mouths were closed by stern threats of gagging.

At a sign from their leader, the Vigilantes drew away from their captives, consulting for a brief space; then, as a decision was reached, they separated in order to more speedily carry out the sentence of Judge Lynch.

That sentence was gravely delivered by Hardress Knox, as follows:

"You have been tried and found guilty of

rustling, fellows. Luckily for you, no one now present can positively swear that you have run off any of our hoofs or horns, else you'd be dancing on air before the hour was out; but the suspicion is strong enough to merit the sentence, which is just this:

"You will each one of you receive twenty lashes, well administered upon the naked back, and then be turned loose, to leave this country under penalty of hanging in case you are ever caught inside our jurisdiction again. And so, may the devil bless our humble efforts toward your reformation!"

The three cowboys began to plead anew for mercy, even while swift glances at each other told how much less severe was this punishment than the one they expected to hear announced; but Old Pap Ryan flushed hotly as flogging was mentioned, and fixing the Vigilante Chief with his now glittering eyes, he hoarsely spoke out:

"Better kill me than whip, you hell-hound! I owe ye too mighty much a'ready, an' so I say—send me after my pore boy, ef ye're wise, but don't ye dast talk o' floggin' a white man! Don't ye, now, I say!"

"That thought stings you, then?" demanded Knox, with a crafty light leaping into his hard brown eyes as he moved a bit closer the veteran. "Will you buy yourself clear, old fellow?"

"Will I—what?"

"Will you buy off from the flogging, by telling us all you know about the Rustlers, their leader, their hiding-places, their plans? And, to begin with, who and what was the crazy fool who rode to his death, over yonder?" with a half-nod toward the sunken river.

Old Pap Ryan turned ghastly pale at that blunt allusion to his terrible loss, and his tones were hardly articulate as he spoke in reply:

"He was jest a pore, romantic little boy, who let himself be led a bit out o' the straight path 'long of listenin' to idle gassin'. But he never done anything wrong, sir; 'fore the Good Marster up yender, he was clean white, an' innocent o' wrong-doin' ez ever a suckin' babby, sir!"

"That's your say-so, old man, but unless he was guilty, and knew he was guilty, why should he take such desperate chances to escape when we challenged him to halt? Now explain that, please?"

"Beca'se he knowed the bloody repetation Hard Knox toted!" almost fiercely flashed the old man, striving in vain to burst his bonds. "You skeered him to his death, cuss an' double cuss you all over, Hard Knox! May his ghost ha'nt ye by night an' by day from this on, you devil!"

CHAPTER III.

OLD PAP RYAN'S DEVOTION

THE Vigilante leader smiled a bit as that fierce curse was hurled into his face, but he betrayed no stronger emotion, coolly standing by until the old man found his efforts were all in vain, for practiced hands had applied those bonds.

"I gave him fair warning, and if he preferred taking such long chances, I reckon he had his good reasons for the choice. You called him Kid; does that mean the fellow we've learned to know as the Prairie Kid, old man?"

"He was white; clean white, an' you druv him crazy to his death!" muttered the veteran, head drooping once more as his muscles relaxed. "Cuss you, all! An' double cuss you, Hard Knox!"

The Vigilante repeated his question, but without eliciting further answer. Old Pap Ryan seemed fairly stunned by that awful death, and when forced to look up, 'twas only to mumble fiercely impotent curses upon the Vigilantes.

Hard Knox turned to the cowboys with his questions, but received scant satisfaction.

All they knew was that the missing man answered to the name of Prairie Kid; that he seemed afraid of falling into the hands of the Vigilance Committee; but that they had no record of his ever transgressing the law.

"Come!" cried Knox in fierce impatience. "Out with it, one of you! Tell the whole truth and I'll turn you loose with unmarred hide. Bite your tongues, and I'll bite your fool backs ten-fold deeper! Isn't this Prairie Kid one of the head Rustlers, now?"

"Tell him a lie, an' I'll chaw ye'r black hearts out!" viciously cried Old Pap Ryan, then his head flying back before an angry stroke of the Vigilante's clinched right hand.

If either one of the cowboys had felt tempted to speak more openly, either in truth or with false testimony, that swift menace warned them to silence, and Hard Knox vainly tried to glean further knowledge concerning that black-masked horseman.

"So much the worse for all of you!" he coldly asserted, ceasing his useless efforts. "You, Dick Fanshawe, was turned off the Square Cross Ranch, under suspicion of adding rustling to your regular duties as line-rider, and—"

"Hope may die, boss, ef I ever—"

"You'll die soon enough, without hoping for it," came the grim interruption. "But that discharge, added to the fact that this Kid preferred death to captivity, more than justifies us in finding you guilty. And so—measure out their medicine, boys!"

The members of that armed band were only waiting for some such permission, and now cut precious little time to waste, pouncing upon the four prisoners, paying not the slightest heed to their cries for mercy or their vows of vengeance.

One by one they were stripped to the waist, and bound firmly to the trees beside which their camp fire had been kindled.

Knox stood a little apart, frowning as he watched these preliminaries, then nodding his head when the chosen executioners looked his way.

Five strong-armed men stood in line, quirt in hand. At that nod, the first one took a step forward, striking swift and pitilessly at the naked back before him, then moving along to give place to another, and another, repeating this movement until each of the five had dealt four strokes.

Hard Knox did the counting, paying no heed to the fierce yells which the earlier cuts produced, nor to the groans and gasps of bitter pain which came as the pitiless punishment went on.

When the full score was counted, he lifted a hand, and the five men drew aside, giving place to another squad, with a second victim selected.

Old Pap Ryan was left to the last, and when the first stroke made its mark across his bony back, a deadly fire leaped into his sunken eyes as they turned far enough to fix upon the face of the Vigilante chief.

"Tell 'em to kill me, ef ye hain't a plum fool, Hard Knox!" he said in strained tones, never flinching, although the second blow just then scored his back. "Ef I live through this day, I'll shorely kill you! I tell ye so, with a f'ar warnin': I'll kill ye like a dog, as pay fer the murder o' my—of the Prairie Kid!"

"Go on, Jamison!" commanded Knox, as the fourth of the squad hesitated before dealing his stroke. "Wake him up, can't you? Put a bit more ginger into it, lads! Now: a big round dollar for every yelp you can fetch from the old villain!"

More and more savagely fell the blood-moistened quirts, while the Vigilante leader leaned more and more forward as he counted the strokes and listened for what never came.

Never a word more spoke the old man. Never a cry for mercy, never a moan of pain, never a quiver of all the bitter agony he surely must be feeling; for the purplish wales turned to crimson, then the scarlet blood began to trickle adown that gaunt back.

Hard Knox lifted a hand as the full tale was told, then snatched a bloody quirt from the hand of its owner, striding forward to the side of the old man, bending far enough to fetch their eyes on a level as he harshly spoke:

"That's your first dose for being a thief and a Rustler, old fellow, and now—here's to show what I think of your vow!"

The quirt rose, then fell, driven by all the power Knox could summon to his assistance.

The lash cut through skin and bruised flesh, starting the hot blood in little rills; but his victim never moaned nor flinched.

Instead, there was a baggard smile curling those thin lips as Old Pap Ryan gazed steadily into that anger-flushed visage.

And once again there came the slowly uttered warning:

"Better kill me, Hard Knox!"

Turning, Knox hurled the whip far from him, a low but fierce execration hissing through his clinched teeth as he did so.

Crossing over to where his horse was standing, he sprung into the saddle before saying more; and then his words were few.

"Turn 'em loose, boys! And you, my pretty gentlemen, don't forget the rest of it. Rack out o' this in a holy hurry if you're wise, for if we catch any one of you on this wide range after this day is spent, up a tree you go, to scare the crows!"

The ropes were removed, and the lash-marked wretches were left to clothe themselves and to soothe their shameful wounds as best they might, while the Vigilantes rode briskly out of the little valley, taking with them the horses so recently owned by the real or suspected Rustlers.

When set at liberty, Old Pap Ryan sunk down in a limp and seemingly nerveless heap, hardly showing signs of life for the better part of half an hour, paying no heed to the groans and curses so freely scattered around by the trio of cowboys.

But, as they at length moved away, he roused himself, shaking off the dull stupor which had taken possession of his senses, huskily quavering:

"Whar now, lads? Shorely you won't—you hain't gwine—"

"We shorely be gwine fer to rack out o' this jest as quick as we kin make our huffs kiver the sod, Pap," declared Fanshawe. "'Nough's enough, an' ary more'd be wuss than a hog's dose!"

"But—thar's the Kid, boys!"

"He's past our holpin', hain't he, Pap?"

The old man bowed head and covered face, groaning as he did so.

"Waal, that settles it, don't it?" with a shrug of his shoulders which brought a wry grimace to his dirty face. "He's past our holpin', but we hain't quite so fur gone; an' so—best come with us, Pap, fer Hard Knox don't sw'ar what he won't do: cuss him all over!"

Again the cowboys started, and again the old man appealed for aid.

"Help me find the—find him, mates!" he implored, brushing the ugly mists from his eyes as he went on. "He was a good lad, an' never went back on eyther word or friend! He wouldn't leave a mangy dog to feed the fishes, ef he could help it; an' so—help me find an' give him decent— Oh, hottest fires eternally roast ye, Hard Knox!"

The old man flung aloft his arms, shaking his tightly clinched fists as he stared through those scalding tears at the heavens above.

His intense emotions overcame him, and with a choking cry he staggered and fell.

The cowboys looked on in silence for a few moments. They could see by his shivering form that Old Pap Ryan was not dead, but neither man turned a hand toward lending him aid or comfort.

Interchanging glances, they moved silently away, quickening their steps as they receded from that little clump of trees, then breaking into a hurried trot as they neared the upper end of the oval valley.

For several minutes Old Pap lay as he had fallen; then he began to rally, finally rising up to stare about him with dazed, dimmed eyes, looking for those recreant comrades, but looking in vain.

They had passed out of sight, and as he began to realize this shameful truth, Ryan gathered fresh strength. A tinge of angry color stole into his wrinkled face, a glow of scorn brightened his eyes as he turned toward the river bank over which the Prairie Kid had plunged so madly.

"I'm comin', Kid!" he muttered, as he advanced. "The old man hain't gwine back on ye like them durn dogs—no he hain't, now! I'm comin'—comin' to find an' give ye all that's left fer Ole Pap to give: a decent buryin', boy! An' then—an' then—oh, cuss ye, Hard Knox! Devil save ye fer my grips, I'm prayin', now, ye hell-hound!"

Little by little his bodily powers were coming back to him, even as his brain was growing clearer; and after gazing for a few seconds over the steep bank, Old Pap Ryan hastened to reach the level below.

By this time the branded mustang had

rallied from that shock sufficiently to gain its feet, standing close against the further bank, seemingly afraid to make any effort to escape further.

Old Pap paid no attention to the animal, but entering the water not far above the point where horse and rider had made that mad leap, he swam slowly downward, trying to pierce the stream with his gaze, then diving down to grope along the bottom in search for the corpse of the Prairie Kid.

Time and time again he clove those dark depths, only to meet with disappointment, and a despairing groan escaped his lips as he swam to shore, needing rest for a little time.

Hark! What was that sound?

"Pap! Oh, Pap!"

The old man started, shivering as he looked around, and above, just as though he expected to behold the spirit of his beloved boy hovering there!

Ha! There is a stir in the water only a few feet further up the stream from where Ryan is resting, and the old man turns ghastly pale as he sees—is it spook or spirit?

A human head parts the dark waters; a pale face is turned his way for the moment, then dark eyes flash an apprehensive look around, while a familiar voice speaks again:

"Where are the hounds, Pap? Surely they're not—"

"Kid? Holy heaven o' love!" gasped the old man, trembling like a leaf, for he dared not trust to the evidence of his own senses. "I shorely reckoned—you hain't—dead?"

"I'll prove the liveliest corpse you ever saw, Pap, if you'll just make me sure those hounds are not lying in wait for me!" declared the young cowboy chief, forcing a brief laugh as he raised higher above the water. "Where's Hard Knox and his gang, Pap?"

"Gone, but ef I could only think it! Ef I jast knowed I wasn't gone clean crazy, even!" mumbled the dazed old man.

Reassured on that vital point, Prairie Kid drew himself up on the low shelf, and scattering the cold water by a vigorous shake, sprung toward his faithful follower, giving him a hug that was enthusiastic enough to have convinced one even more completely bewildered.

For a brief space Old Pap Ryan looked and acted like one crazed by excess of joy, for this was as though a miracle had been performed—as though the dead had come to life again!

The reaction came, all the more quickly because of what he suffered while so helpless in the grip of the Vigilantes; and crouching there upon the damp shelf, Old Pap Ryan listened to his young master while the Prairie Kid explained his escape.

There was a vast deal of good luck in it all, when the story was told, for Prairie Kid had acted without forethought, and took that reckless leap with a preference for death to captivity in the hands of Hard Knox.

"You know why, Pap," he added in lower tones, the faint smile fading away from his pale face and a look of apprehension taking its place, as those big black eyes roved around on all sides. "I felt the wind of his lead, and that made me cry out; that gave me my first hope of fooling them all, if I could take the leap without knocking the breath out of me!"

"Don't! It cuts me, sharp, jest to think of it, Kid!"

"Well, I'll cut it short, then. I struck the water, and as I did so, I remembered one of the trout I caught for supper last night; remembered how he ran under the bank, just there, and hung my line on a root!"

"I got him out, then, and found that there was a hollow washed under this shelf, plenty large enough for a man to hide in, with his head out of water."

"An' you—glory to God!"

"I ducked in there, and could hear those merciless bloodhounds trampling directly over my head! Ugh!" shaking himself with a little shiver, then looking across to where the mustang still stood in the edge of the water.

"He isn't too badly hurt, I hope, Pap? Couldn't he be gotten out by swimming down to the lower bend, yonder?"

Old Pap Ryan rallied his powers at that, and plunging into the river, he urged and

coaxed the animal beyond its depth, then guided it safely to a point where an ascent to the valley was practicable.

By that time, Prairie Kid was up the bank, ready for further action.

Seeing that the mustang was able to perform its regular duty, Prairie Kid swung himself into the saddle, with the warning:

"Come, Pap! We've got to leave this section in a hurry!"

"Not until I pay off that infarnal hound, Hard Knox, Kid!" declared Ryan, only to flinch from that fierce face and swift gesture.

"That is my work, sir! Hard Knox belongs to me; no one dares forestall my vengeance!" vowed the Cowboy Chief.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VIGILANTE SPORT AT HOME.

HARD KNOX led his armed force through the valley and into the region lying beyond, riding rapidly and in silence until those rocky hills were left behind them, and the more gently rolling range lay in their front.

Then he briefly drew rein, speaking to his following:

"I reckon we've done enough to call it a day's work, gentlemen, even if the sun hasn't reached the dinner-mark, as yet! Of course I don't need to repeat: keep your lips buttoned and let others do the chattering when our work shows for itself.

"We'll break, here, and each one take his own route homeward. Hold yourselves in readiness to answer to the call, for that will only come when it must; then make quick tracks for the regular rendezvous. *Sabe?*"

"We're not to speak of the flogging? Nor of—what went before, then?" asked Joram Kintner, who always wanted to be sure he was right before going ahead.

"Say nothing, but look as wise as you please," answered the Vigilante, with a short, chuckling laugh. "No need to take the whole country into our confidence, is there?"

"Of course not; only—"

"All right, then. Let the outsiders guess and surmise and suspect. We know it all, and that's sufficient. So—good-luck go with you, gentlemen, all!"

"And our best wishes to both bride and bridegroom!" cried one enthusiastic Vigilante, swinging his hat to start the ringing cheer which followed.

Knox bowed his thanks, a warm flush tingling his bronzed cheeks as he listened, a bright glow filling his brown eyes the while.

"Yours truly, gentlemen, for both bride and groom!" he said, bowing until his head nearly touched the withers of his fidgeting horse, then giving it free rein and bounding away as he added, over shoulder; "See you later, all! Meet me at Gillespie's, of course!"

The band of armed men scattered widely, Hard Knox galloping on alone, heading as directly as practicable for his own place known far and wide as "Spider Ranch," so called from his cattle-brand.

The smile quickly faded from his face, and a hard, almost sinister expression took its place.

Handsome, Hardress Knox was and always would be, but he was blessed with very few loving friends, and they would have been fewer still could they have read aright that expression, and fully interpreted the dark thoughts which were just now running through that busy brain.

The Spider Ranch was one of the largest, most valuable pieces of property in that portion of Wyoming. Knox could count his half-bred horses by the hundreds, his graded cattle by the thousands.

He had been among the heaviest losers through audacious "rustling" and covert slaying, and hence it seemed only right and proper that he should take the lead when an "Anti-rustler" force was recruited.

From that force a smaller number had been chosen with care, to act as officers of an outraged law, without following the tedious and uncertain paths marked out by the law; and here again Hardress Knox had come to the front, until he was pretty generally known as the leader of the so-called Vigilance Committee.

This secret force moved swiftly and acted promptly. Here and there had been dis-

covered a dead man; now riddled with bullets, then pendent from bough of tree, but always bearing pinned to bosom the dread signet of the Vigilantes.

But, instead of mending, matters went from bad to worse, and now the entire range was afire, and one might as well be living under martial law, as here, where order and peace ought to reign supreme.

The newspapers took up the cry of outrages on both sides. Officers of justice were calling for reinforcements, and from far-away Texas numerous squads of cowboys were flocking in haste to aid their oppressed brethren of lariat and saddle.

Much of this passed through that busy brain as Hard Knox rode steadily toward his ranch, but far uglier thoughts helped bring that forbidding shadow to his handsome face.

Springing lightly from the saddle as he reached his destination, Knox stripped off saddle and bridle, giving his jaded steed a gentle slap on haunch which sent him off at a trot to his familiar quarters, then abruptly faced the burly fellow who came hip-hopping out from the ranch building.

"Well, Limpy Johns?"

"Well she am, boss!" was the prompt response, as the ugly-faced cripple bobbed his head. "Hed heap o' fun, didn't ye, boss?"

"Don't you rack your mighty intellect over my sport, Limpy, but get a hustle on: I'm almost hungry enough to make a meal off you, only I never did like too mighty much dirt!"

"Which is pritty much why I sheer off from water, boss!" chucklingly retorted the fellow, shuffling away and into the house, where Hardress Knox had already sought refuge.

With a celerity which proved how closely he had been calculating the return of his master, Limpy Johns dished up a plentiful if rather coarsely served meal, and stood by while the ranchman was satisfying his hunger born of many hours in the saddle.

"All's right in the Dark Hole, is it, Limpy?" asked Knox, after a few minutes thus employed. "Grown any better humored, since I saw him last?"

"Waal, I don't guess yes! He wouldn't balk at the dirt, ef so be I was to give him even hafe a chawin' me, boss! An' I try to ram-jam him chuck full o' grub, too!"

"He eats, then? No danger of his starving himself, just through spite on us, eh, Limpy?"

"Don't you think it, boss! But ef I hed my way—"

"You have mine; and that's enough, Limpy. I'll take a bit of a look at our fine gentleman, just for greens!"

Abruptly shoving back his chair, the ranch-owner rose from the table, taking a heavy key from the dingy paw of his crippled henchman, then passing from the room.

Opening a trap door set in the floor of a back room, Knox descended a short flight of steps, groping his way through the darkness for a few feet, then fumbling at an unseen lock until the heavy key fitted into its wards.

The lock yielded, the bolt snapped back. Then Knox pushed open a door, pausing upon the threshold of a second cellar, now dimly lighted up by a foul-smelling kerosene lamp with smoky chimney.

There was a slight stir and rustle coming from the further corner, then an indistinct heap resolved itself into a human being, face pale and lined, but with eyes glowing fierce defiance as the Vigilante Sport moved slowly forward.

"You, is it, you cowardly hound?" cried the prisoner, trying to spring upon his athletic enemy, yet withheld by those strong bonds. "Let me get at you, just once! Let me—oh, you imp of Satan!"

"Oh, you poor, silly, crack-brained ass!" mocked the Vigilante, as he stood beneath the lamp, rubbing his hands in vicious joy, smiling more like a demon than aught of human race. "Get at me? And what then?"

"I'd tear your black heart out, as if—"

"You'd beg and howl for mercy, ten seconds after my grip closed on you, Perry Byrne; and no man living knows that better than your own mother's son," jeered the other, moving still closer.

"Try it, once! Just give me the ghost of a show, and if I don't—"

Hardress Knox laughed his scorn, and the prisoner broke off abruptly, evidently realizing how worse than vain were such tactics.

A look of utter scorn, mingled with intense hatred, marked his pale face during those moments; but he banished the expression, forcing himself to speak calmly.

"What right have you to treat me this way, Hardress Knox? What have I ever done to merit such shameful treatment?"

"The right of might, my pretty lad," jeered the Vigilante Sport; but adding, in slightly altered tones:

"Well, it's not so much what you have done, as what you tried to do, Perry Byrne; and that you can give a shrewd guess at when I tell you how—open your ears, dear boy!"

"Do you know what's going to happen this very blessed night now coming on? Can you even give a guess how—Pah!" flinging out a hand in an impatient gesture, but adding, more swiftly:

"This night witnesses my complete triumph, Perry Byrne? This very night gives me sweet Fanny Gillespie for a bride, and—"

"You lie, you demon!" cried the prisoner, striving his utmost to burst those bonds and grip the throat of his mocker. "She'll never—she'd die rather than mate with a human wolf!"

"You are the liar, Perry Byrne," retorted Knox, hugely enjoying his triumph just then. "All is in readiness, and long before midnight Fanny Gillespie will be transformed into Mrs. Hard Knox! And you—let me say on, dear lad!"

"When Fanny is safely mine—when tomorrow dawns, I'll turn you loose to rustle for yourself, threats or no threats. My hand can always guard my head, and if you're anything less than a born idiot, you'll take your chance and rack out of this in a holy hurry!"

"If you try to kick, or to make trouble between us, so much the worse for you, Perry Byrne! I'll send you across the Great Divide by the rope route, as a horse-thief and cattle-rustler!"

"You lie when you even hint the likes of that, Hard Knox!"

With pantherish agility the Vigilante Sport leaped across the space separating them, slapping the bound man viciously on both cheeks, then bounding as lightly backward, aughing insolently as Perry Byrne strove madly to burst his bonds, if only to wipe out that last insult.

"I'll have your life for this, Hard Knox!"

"So you've sworn to kill me on a round dozen of counts, and more can make precious little difference," mocked his captor. "But, this isn't pure business, and I'd better finish up while about it."

"It's not every man who'd repeat such a warning, Perry Byrne, but I'm so happy as a husband-elect, that I make an exception in your favor. So—listen, will you?"

"When I'm safely wedded to Fanny Gillespie, you shall be set free, to go whither fancy leads you. But, unless you are a born fool, let that fancy lead you by the shortest, easiest route out of Wyoming!"

"You're already posted throughout this range as a cattle-thief, who has made a break to outrun justice, and—"

"You lie in your throat when you say so, Hard Knox!"

"No other living on this range will say or even think that way, my slippery fellow! And the doubly-adorable Fanny? Why, man, dear, she spits with scorn and loathing whenever your name is spoken in her hearing!"

Driven to the very verge of madness by these taunts and insults, all the more stinging coming from the lips of a rival in love, Perry Byrne once more flung all his power into the effort to break away from his fastenings, even falling to the hard-beaten floor of dirt as he writhed and twisted, growling and panting, like an infuriated wild beast.

Hard Knox watched his foeman for a few seconds, then turned away with mocking laugh and jeering words, passing through

the heavy door, and turning key in lock, he made his way through the darkness to the flight of steps leading to the room above.

CHAPTER V.

HIS NECK IN A NOOSE.

JEROME GILLESPIE sharply checked his horse, holding the reins taut as he bent a little forward, hand to brows, his blue eyes thus shaded from the sun as he gazed intently ahead.

Half a mile distant the head and torso of another man showed just above the crest of a land-wave, one hand making a gesture which had arrested that roving if not anxious gaze.

That signaling hand now took off a hat to wave, and thus granted a fairer view of the man, a long breath (almost a sigh as of great relief) came from the stockman's lungs.

"Tom Curry!" Gillespie muttered, straightening up in the saddle, while the color returned to his bronzed cheeks. "I thought—I feared it might be—curse the bloodhound, anyway!"

With unusual rancor came that final exclamation, and touching horse with spur, Gillespie rode toward the footman, now well up on that crest.

Rather under than over the average size and weight of his sex, this man was trim-built as a deer, looking fit to race for life or for kingdom, just as he stood in his rough yet fairly-neat cowboy garb.

As the sun shone into his tanned face just then it came very near being handsome, with its keen gray eyes, its straight nose, its mustached lips and strong yet dimple-marked chin.

"Well, Curry, what is it?" demanded Gillespie, as he drew rein in front of the man whose swift signal had halted him so abruptly.

"You're in no mighty rush, I reckon, colonel?" quietly, almost drawlingly spoke the footman, something in his tones leading one to set him down as coming from south of Mason and Dixon's line.

"I was going home, but—well, what's gone wrong, now?"

The ranchman changed color a bit, as he divided that sentence, the first half coming with hesitation, the other moiety in a tone of strong irritation.

Plainly Jerome Gillespie was ill at ease, or else feeling out of sorts with himself and all his surroundings, this bright day.

"Another bite off the same old twist, colonel," quietly answered Tom Curry, but with those faint lines across his forehead growing a bit deeper.

"Not—the Vigilantes, you mean?"

"That's it, colonel."

Something like an oath rose in the stockman's throat, but was smothered ere it fairly found utterance. His face turned yellow, and there was a look as of a hunted animal in his eyes as they flashed hastily around, taking in that wide scope of country at a glance.

The ghost of a smile flashed into and out of that keenly observant face just beyond his horse's head, but it left no trace behind to tell tales as those roving eyes came back, their owner huskily asking:

"What devil's work have they been up to now, Curry?"

"Pretty much the same old story, colonel; and yet it might have been worse, considering."

"Who has the lightning struck, now, Tom?" asked Gillespie, trying to force an indifference his every feature was giving the lie to.

"The Tampkins; old man and boy. I just chanced across them when—but I can tell you all that while we go, yonder," said Curry, giving a nod of his head, then moving off in that same direction.

Jerome Gillespie hesitated to follow. In fact he made a move as though to wheel his horse to the left, like one resolved to resume the journey thus interrupted.

But Tom Curry glanced over a shoulder, stopping abruptly to add:

"Come, colonel! It's no mighty journey, and there's nothing like taking evidence with your own eyes! Come on, and don't worry about treading on my poor heels!"

Just as he had done far too often in life,

Jerome Gillespie yielded to another's will, riding along after the footman, who broke into a gliding run, covering the ground with rapidity, yet betraying not a trace of exertion beyond the ordinary.

As much as mortal man could, Tom Curry resembled a clean-built, easy-going hound, just then, and despite his own strong anxiety Gillespie could not help making that comparison as he had to touch horse with spur to avoid being distanced by the runner.

Although keeping his lead with apparent ease, Curry made no effort to fulfill his half-pledge, offering no further explanation as to that, hinted at tragedy or the manner of its discovery.

On his side, Jerome Gillespie asked no questions. He could give a fair guess as to what would be found at the end of that rapid journey, and just then he felt hardly fit for playing the inquisitor.

For the better part of an hour Tom Curry led the way, only slackening his pace as he came in close view of a timbered watercourse lying between two rocky ridges; a portion of the same stream into which the Prairie Kid took his mad leap that same morning.

"They're just ahead, now," said the human grayhound, his brows a little damp, but with hardly quickened breath for all the miles he had so rarely covered.

"Not—how?" hesitatingly asked the ranchman, eyes roving in advance, as though eager to see, yet fearing to find.

"The old style; rope route, of course," came the curt response.

Five minutes later they were gazing in silence upon a grim if not ghastly spectacle: two rudely garbed figures hanging side by side from the same stout limb, their hands bound behind their backs, their ankles confined, but with naught to disguise their horribly black and distorted faces.

A boldly written placard hung from the neck of each victim, giving name of father and son, together with the crime for which punishment had been measured forth; and underneath was the black symbol which had grown so terribly known and commonly respected of late: the token of the Wyoming Vigilance Committee!

"I was looking up a few strays from the Spider, colonel," quietly spoke the footman, by way of explaining his part in that grim incident of sorely troubled days. "I chanced down here, and this is what I found!"

"Not the prettiest sight in the world, now, is it, colonel?"

Gillespie shivered, averting his eyes. Again they betrayed a terror close akin to that a hardly hunted animal exhibits; but he still had will power enough to keep silence, without further self-betrayal.

Tom Curry waited a few moments as though expecting an answer, but as none came, he moved a bit closer, placing one brown hand upon a muscular thigh as he looked keenly up into the face of its owner, adding:

"How much more of this have we got to endure, colonel?"

"I don't—what do you mean, Curry?"

The mate to that brown hand jerked out toward those lifeless shapes, and the cowboy spoke in low but stern tones:

"Isn't it plain enough, Gillespie? What can I mean—but what you surely meant as all honest men must mean! That there has been too mighty much of this lynching and hanging and torturing!"

A hot flush came into the stockman's face, and his blue eyes glowed redly as he leaned a bit closer to the footman. But then he gave a sudden shake of head and body, almost rudely drawing back as he spoke:

"What have I got to do with it, sir? It's no affair of mine, and so long as the Vigilantes elect their victims as choicely as they have in this case, I can only say—let the good work go on!"

"But who goes bail that they will do that, colonel? Who can say that I, or yourself, even, may not be their next victim?"

"Time enough to ford the river when we come to it, pardner!" cried Gillespie, with real or forced gayety, then wheeling his horse and riding away at a brisk trot, calling back over his shoulder: "Better let 'em hang, Curry! They're past helping in life, and there's no need of your making it three of a kind!"

The ranchman gave a taste of the steel to his steed, sending him on a brisk gallop, never once looking back to see what became of the cowboy from Spider Ranch.

But his face grew darker and more troubled as he rode toward the ranch, and occasional mutterings came over his bearded lips.

"Is he serving Hard Knox, or not? Is he trying to trap me into—what did he mean by asking—if I only knew! Where's the living man I can trust, now?"

Jerome Gillespie did not spare his good horse, although the faithful creature had covered many a long mile since break of day.

With only brief breaks for breath, that gallop was maintained until they came in sight of the home buildings of "Turkey-track Ranch," the next in extent and importance to the buildings of Hard Knox.

As with the Spider Ranch, this property had gained its present title through the peculiar brand chosen by Jerome Gillespie for use upon his four-footed property.

Turning his sweating steed over to a waiting hand, the ranchman hurried into the home-building, where a young and more than fair maiden was ready to give him greeting.

There were slightly reddened circles about her big, blue eyes, and her face wore a pleading, pitiful expression, as her arms flew up to join about the neck of her father.

No words escaped her quivering lips, but the ranchman only too easily interpreted that silent question, and hardening his heart as best he might, he quickly, almost harshly muttered:

"It's no use, Fanny, so don't you play the fool, my girl! Go and get ready for the circus, for it's got to come off!"

"I'd rather die, father!" passionately cried the girl, trying to draw his head down so she could smother those cruel words with her imploring kisses. "I can't—oh, daddy! you know I can't do it!"

Gillespie caught his breath sharply, and his own eyes grew less clear, yet he caught her arms and almost rudely broke their hold from about his neck, gruffly saying:

"It's past hoping, I tell you, child! If that infernal—if Perry Byrne had been worth a single one of these tears Fanny, it couldn't have come to this pass! If he'd been half a man, he would have roped and run you off long ago!"

The maiden flung back her head with a flash of fire brightening her tear-dimmed eyes, agitatedly exclaiming:

"And so he would, only—only for you—only that I couldn't—Oh, daddy, daddy! Why did you hate him so bitterly? Why couldn't you let us—and now—that nasty, mean, old Hard Knox!"

"Yes, I did hate him, but less than I hate that devil, Hard Knox!" impulsively exploded the ranchman. "If I'd only known—but what's the use? It's too late, now!"

His words, tone and manner all combined to give the poor girl a last ray of hope, and once more she clung to the neck of her father as she brokenly pleaded for pity, for mercy, for at least a respite from the doom she had grown to fear even as she loathed it.

Gillespie felt her grief and his face showed as much; but he once more crushed under his powerful emotions, forcing himself to repeat that harsh decision, his tones fully as harsh, through the great will-power brought to bear.

"It's eternally too late, now, Fanny, though it cuts me mighty deep to go against ye, pet! If Perry Byrne—curse him for a runaway cur!"

"Don't—oh, daddy, don't curse him, for—I love him still!"

"I'd ought to curse him double-times over for that!" harshly cried the stockman but cutting himself short as a slender, pale, prematurely-aged woman came quickly forward, with uplifted hand as she spoke.

"Don't, husband! Can't you see? the poor child isn't fit to bear any such words, now. If it must be to-night—"

"Of course it must, and you know it, mother! If that fool Byrne had skipped with the child, he couldn't have hurt me for it; but now—if he can't have a wedding, he'll surely have a hanging! And—"

"Father—Jerome!" agitatedly exclaimed

Mrs. Gillespie, lifting a hand in swift warning, but the stockman doggedly finished his speech.

"And it's my neck that's in the noose, Fanny!"

The maiden sunk back with a low, agitated cry, but as yet scarcely comprehending the awful truth.

The mother caught her close to her breast, shaking a warning head at the father, but vainly now as before.

For many long days and nights Jerome Gillespie had lived in silent torment, and now his will-power had almost deserted him. He felt that he could no longer wear the mask before these, his loved ones, and though each word cut deeply into his own heart, he would not spare either wife or daughter.

"Sounds ugly, don't it? But it's gospel truth, for all that; and if we fly the track now, just as Hard Knox is prinking for his wedding, why I'll have to—listen, both of ye!"

In brief, bare terms he told of the spectacle viewed in company with Thomas Curry that day, then swiftly added:

"Right there you have the picture, Fanny! Unless you marry Hardress Knox, just as we've arranged for this evening, I'll be like those two poor devils before another sun comes up!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE VIGILANTE SPORT GROWS CURIOUS.

It was pretty well along in the afternoon when Hardress Knox left the underground den in which he had so securely imprisoned his rival in love, and he gave a bit of a frown as he took note of the position of the sun, for he had still no small amount of work to be done before he would be at liberty to seek his charming bride elect.

Limpy Johns was awaiting his coming, and gave an inquisitive grin as he received the key to that gloomy prison.

"Durn sight mo' wolf than lamb, eh boss?" he ventured, deeming it the part of prudence to feel his way before advancing too fast or too far. "Hain't sweetened up no great into his temper, don't reckon?"

"Keep your fingers out of reach and that wolf won't bite you, Limpy. You can play guard without patting his head, can't you?"

"I'd want a mighty long an' hefty club fer to do that same patten', boss! An' yit—better make it that way, to my notion, sir!"

"My notions count, not yours, Johns," gruffly retorted the Vigilante Sport, moving toward the room which served him as private office, followed by his crippled henchman. "I'm off for a bit, and while I'm gone I trust wholly to you so far as—Limpy?"

"On deck, boss!"

"It's a mighty slippery tongue that hangs in your mouth, Limpy, but I gave you fair enough warning when we run in this head of game. Still, no harm to make sure, so how many of the boys know about Perry Byrne?"

"Never a blessed one 'cept me, boss!"

"That's straight, Johns? You haven't let aught slip out when you were drunk, or gassing?"

"Cross my heart an' hope to die, boss!"

"All right! I'll see that you're not forgotten when pay day rolls around, Limpy. And now—keep up your good looks, old man! Guard that fellow as you would an only eye, for if he should get loose—well, if he let you pass, I'd surely kill you like a dog!"

"Which you kin, an' mighty welcome, boss," confidently assured Johns.

"I will, be sure! You know now what I want: to have him held fast until after the wedding, to-night! After that—well, I'm not caring so mighty much, either way."

"They's jest the one way which is right an' safe an' fit fer to foller, boss," quickly declared the crippled cook, tapping a dirty palm with a dirtier forefinger to mark his speech. "A dead dog cain't bite wuth a cent. A cold tongue cain't do no loud talkin'. An' the only safe inemy is a dead inemy—so thar!"

"Well, time enough to think over all that later on, Limpy."

"Thar's no time like the time as is right now, boss, an' thar's no way o' bein' safe

'cept makin' it safe," doggedly persisted the cripple. "Whar's the sense in takin' chances, when it's so dead easy?"

"How easy?"

"Shet off his wind, then hitch him up a tree! It'll all be laid to the Vigilantes, don't ye see? An' he's already posted as a runaway boss-thief!"

Hardress Knox slowly smoothed down his mustache and imperial, but after a few moments spent in reflection, quietly said:

"It may come to that, in the end, Limpy; but we'll let it lay over for just now. Do your duty as watch-dog, and keep a still tongue between your teeth. Now—scat!"

"Shell I fix yer hoss, boss? An' which one: gray or black?"

"The gray. I'll be out by the time you have him ready, Limpy."

As the crippled cook beat a retreat, Hardress Knox opened his desk and fumbled for a few seconds among the papers in a certain pigeon-hole.

He bent over one of those papers, containing a list of names, smiling grimly as he read.

Replacing this, he sought for and found another document, giving it a hasty reading, like one whose brain and eyes had long since grown familiar with the contents. He started to place this paper in his pocket, but hesitated, finally restoring it to its original position, closing and locking the desk, then hurrying from both room and house.

Limpy Johns was just leading up a noble gray gelding, and springing actively into the saddle, the ranchman rode off at a rapid pace.

Leaving the ranch-buildings far behind him, the Vigilante Sport kept on for mile after mile, only slackening his pace when his present destination came into sight.

Glancing at his watch, he frowned a bit while muttering:

"Half an hour late! Still, I reckon Curry wouldn't rack out without—I knew it!"

Those words were drawn forth by sight of a human shape just coming into sight at the edge of yonder little patch of timber, and riding on the stockman sprung from the saddle to heartily greet the same nimble-footed fellow whose coming had so startled Jerome Gillespie, several hours earlier in the day.

"Better late than never, old man!" cheerily cried the Vigilante Chief as their hands crossed in a warm grip. "I'm not often the last to show on deck when business calls, but—well, if a fellow isn't excusable for finding his hands over-full on his wedding-eve, when is he?"

"I'm not sweating over the delay, Knox," quietly answered Curry. "I knew you would come, since you promised."

"My word is my bond, and you know it, pardner!" just a trifle boastfully exclaimed the ranchman. "I couldn't well get here earlier, but now I have come, what's the good word?"

"You have it, if either of us."

"Nothing new, then?"

"Well, the Vigilantes were at work again, last night."

"Is that so?" ejaculated Knox, in mock surprise. "What sort of work was it they took a hand in, Tommy?"

"The old, old story, of course," answered Curry, with a shadow darkening his brows as his keen eyes shot a half-veiled look upward to the face of the athlete. "Hung the Tampkins, father and son."

"What ought to have been done long before this too. If you've no worse news than that, old fellow, I'll forgive you!"

"I stumbled across them as they ornamented the trees, purely by accident, of course," added Curry, with a fleeting smile which was matched by a chuckling sound from those other lips.

"Purely by chance is good, old man! Go on, though."

"Well, later on I happened to run up against Jerome Gillespie, who was heading for his ranch, and—"

"Where had he been?" harshly interrupted Knox, frowning blackly.

"I never asked for, nor did he volunteer the information. The notion struck me to see just how he'd act under such circumstances, and so I took him in tow, leading him up against the cold meat!"

"And the colonel: what did he do? What

did he say? What did he look like?" eagerly demanded the Vigilante Chief.

"Mighty pale around the gills, for one thing, although he made a right fair stagger at holding his nerve. Still, it cut him deep, and that led me on to make a further test."

"How do you mean? Surely you didn't—"

"Don't worry, pardner; I never betrayed my own hand while trying to read his cards."

"Did you read them, though?"

"Well, not so clearly as I hoped, for a fact," came the candid admission. "I asked him how much longer we'd have to endure such outrages, and gave him a fair chance to put himself on record; but he either suspected the trap, or feared to take the bait. Unless he is wholly innocent, of course?"

"Were the Tampkins innocent, do you think?" jeeringly demanded the head of the Vigilance Committee.

"They were proven guilty, over and over. And Gillespie?"

"Has been just as deep in the mud as they were in the mire, sir! I hold his neck in my grip—like that!"

Hardress Knox made a significant gesture to further point his meaning, then added in calmer tones:

"Well, let that part of the story lie over for a better chance. You couldn't trap the cunning old 'coon, then, Curry?"

"No. I was only feeling my way, then, but if he's all you think and say, I'll corral him yet," quietly asserted the other man, jaws growing more square as they closed after the words.

"Is that all you have to report, Curry?"

"No, unless you're too headstrong to take a fair warning, Knox," was the gravely earnest reply as the fellow drew close enough to rest a friendly hand upon the Vigilante's arm while adding: "There's a bitter black storm brewing, sir, and unless you find close cover, you'll catch the weight of it all, too."

"What sort of a storm, Curry?"

"One that will leave death and ruin along its pathway, be sure! Men have been whispering for months past, but now they are beginning to utter their thoughts aloud."

"You mean just what, Curry?"

"That the whole country is beginning to stir and grow hot! They say there's far more of spite work and private revenge in the doings of the Vigilance Committee, than of law and justice."

"Who dares to say all this?" fiercely demanded Hard Knox.

Curry flung out both hands with a sweeping gesture, as though to include the whole of those vast cattle ranges.

"It comes from all sides, from every quarter, sir! And if you are a wise man, you'll give heed to the mutterings of the storm, not wait until it actually breaks."

Hardress Knox broke into a laugh, long and loud, hands on his hips as he leaned backward to give his lungs free play. Then his magnificent figure was drawn proudly erect as he spoke in crisp, harsh tones:

"Give me the names of those who talk that way, Tom Curry, and I'll put them down upon the black list for future reference! Names, I say!"

"I beg to be excused, for the present, at least," dryly spoke the other man, just now seeming an independent creature rather than spy or tool for another's using. "You'll hear it all soon enough, if you keep your ears open, and so—one word further, please."

"What is it, then?"

"Do you know anything at all about a young man named Frank McBride?"

Those keen eyes were watching for start or sign, but none came. The Vigilante Sport stared half vacantly for a brief space, then slowly shook his head in negation.

"Never even heard of such a person, far as I know now. Why do you ask? What has he been doing to get you on his track?"

It seemed Curry's turn to pause for thought, now, and for a score seconds neither man broke the silence.

Then the smaller man raised his cool, keen eyes to the Vigilante's face, abruptly changing the subject.

"What has become of the young fellow they call Perry Byrne, Knox?"

The ranchman gave an involuntarily start at this totally unexpected question, but rallied swiftly, gruffly demanding:

"What's that to you, Tom Curry?"

"One thing at a time, an I believe my question came first," coolly parried the spy, or whatever else he might be. "Where is young Byrne?"

"How should I know where he is?" gruffly growled the Vigilante. "Do you reckon I'm keeping tab on all the young hoodlums cavorting over this range? Don't you think it, then!"

"Do you know where he is, or what has become of him, though?" persisted Curry, sticking to his point with grim pertinacity.

"No, I don't know where he is! No more than what rumor says, and you know how often rumor lies like a goat!"

"About his being taken in charge by the Committee?"

"About his running for his neck, rather!" with a short laugh. "He's posted as a Rustler, and I'd hate to bet good money that he's wrongfully accused, too!"

"Then you haven't dealt with him, by rope or by bullet, Knox?"

"No, sir! I never harmed the fellow, either as officer or private person. He did rather cut across my trail, once, but he took hint and got out of the way too mighty lively for a racket. And—they say he has been branded as one of the cattle-crooks, but I can hardly believe that of the young fellow."

"Then you can't throw any light upon his whereabouts?"

"Not the faintest glimmer, sir! Why are you so anxious to find him?"

"Well," hesitatingly admitted Curry, like one driven into a corner from whence he sees no other escape, "a fool's notion struck me that the two young fellows might turn out to be the same person, and I want to make sure, one way or the other."

"Frank McBride? Who is he? Why do you want to mix up those two in one?" curiously asked the Vigilante Sport.

"You can't tell me the truth of it, then, Knox?"

"No."

"Neither can I, and that leaves us even. So-long, pardner! See you later!" and Thomas Curry turned away and broke into a long, swift lope.

CHAPTER VII.

A DOSE OF HIS OWN MEDICINE.

HARDRESS KNOX dropped hand to pistol and seemed about to check that uncereemonious leave-taking by a leaden messenger, but the fierce temptation was short-lived, and neither hail nor bullet were sent after Tom Curry.

"Go it, legs!" the Vigilante Sport muttered, grim admiration mingling with a far less friendly emotion as he mounted his horse and set off on the return trip to Spider Ranch. "I've got too mighty much on hands right now to mix up in another racket; but—time'll come when I have you weighed out and chalked up!"

As he reached one swell, Curry was just crossing another, heading off at a sharp angle. Knox scowled as he saw, but touched up his horse and hurried away on his course.

"Making for the Turkey-track, looks like; but is he? What is he? I'd give a good bit to know just that, for dead certain! Is he fish, flesh, or good old hog-meat? Is he playing on the dead level, or—cursed if I don't more'n half believe he's playing us all for suckers!"

Judging from the expression his face wore, that was a far from agreeable thought; and as the head of the Vigilante Committee pressed on homeward, his meditations were hardly favorable toward the nimble-footed spy whose report he had ridden so far to receive on his wedding eve.

The sun was lying low when Hardress Knox reached his home, and he had hardly a word to fling to Limpy Johns, that efficient aid being the only man visible upon the place, now.

Bidding the cripple have another horse in readiness, Knox hurried into the house and changed his clothes, emerging in a remarkably short space of time, quite a different appearing personage.

His garb seemed better fitted for the promi-

nent figure he was hoping to cut in the ceremony set for that same evening, but it could hardly be said to have improved his looks; in that rough-and-ready rig Hardress Knox looked far more the man.

"All hands gone, have they?" he asked as he relieved Johns of the bay horse.

"That's what! Ketch 'em any other way! An' countin' on free chuck an' buckets o' joyful? Hugh! That's why I'm the only durn fool left, I reckon, boss!"

"I'll even it up to you, old man!" declared Knox as he mounted and turned away. "Don't try to even up on your own hook, though, for you've got that young cub to guard, Limpy!"

"Hope to die ef I tetch ary drap, boss!"

Hardress Knox said no more, for he was already breaking into a keen lope, heading for the distant Gillespie Ranch, where a fair if not willing bride was awaiting the coming of the bridegroom.

The Vigilante Sport frowned a bit as he glanced to the west, where the sun had vanished, and where the red glow was rapidly fading away into gray evening.

"I ought to have been there by this, or before!" he muttered, letting the bay gelding feel the steel. "And so I would have been, only—How much better off would I have been? Fanny isn't—Curse that Perry Byrne, I say!"

As so often happens, the wholly innocent had to suffer, and the next few minutes were anything but moments of bliss for the poor horse.

Hardress Knox loved Fanny Gillespie as wholly, as truly, as passionately as it lay in his power to worship any person other than himself; but he was not blindly in love, and knew only too well that he was riding to claim a reluctant bride.

He knew that nothing less than the deadly hold he had upon Jerome Gillespie could have brought about that arrangement, and that knowledge was rankling just now.

By the time he had covered the first quarter-score miles, twilight was deepening into darkness; but both horse and rider knew the road from start to finish, and pressed onward without halt or hesitation.

However busy were his thoughts, Knox certainly was not expecting trouble of the sort which now came his way without so much as the faintest warning: came in the guise of dark shapes leaping up from an ambush on both sides of that trail, some aiming for the horse, others with eyes for the rider alone.

Hard Knox instinctively flinched as he caught the snaky whir of a running noose, but before he could do or say aught, the loop of a lariat closed about his shoulders, and an instant later he was jerked endlong out of the saddle.

He struck the dry earth with stunning force, and while sure hands caught his horse, others were fastened upon his person, choking him down and rendering his feeble efforts worse than useless.

It was all like a bit from a nightmare dream.

He was nearly senseless, thanks to that heavy fall upon head and shoulders. He dimly saw ghostly shapes round about him. He felt, still like one under an ugly incubus, the merciless grip of sinewy fingers; he felt that bonds were being swiftly applied to his limbs, and knew the dim sight was being driven from his eyes. Then—he seemed hurled far out and away: hurled through measureless space to meet death or—

Instead, the Vigilante Chief was lifted from the ground and placed across his own saddle, in obedience to the muttered commands of one who appeared to be in full authority; then the little company moved away from the scene of capture.

His first fairly accurate sensation was of rapid riding in a most uncomfortable position; bound hand and foot, blindfolded, lying across a saddle, with a couple of strong hands boring into his back the more surely to guard against his falling off, either by accident or intentionally.

Naturally enough he began to struggle to better his case, and the fellow who rode behind his saddle, called out a warning which ended in a change for the better.

Hardress Knox was set astride the saddle, then his ankles were connected by a rope running under the horse's belly. He strove

to speak, but that only caused a heavy muffler to be wrapped tightly around his head and face, after which that wild ride was resumed.

Hard Knox could only give a rough guess at course taken, or distance covered, since a goodly portion of the time had been little better than a blank, so far as reasoning was concerned; but presently he felt that they were leaving the open range for a timbered tract.

A leafy bough or two struck him, and then, while he was striving to locate himself, his horse was abruptly halted, and he was fairly tumbled from saddle to earth.

He flung all his powers into an effort to wrench his hands free, knowing that his belt of arms yet remained upon his person; but he was closely watched, and strong hands closed upon his arms, while a gruff voice bade him to lie still.

"Stiddy, fool, or ye'll end by kickin' yourself clean over the range!" was the significant warning.

The keen point of knife or dagger came pricking through those muffling folds, and as the steel tickled his throat, Hard Knox ceased his struggles.

"That's whiter," approvingly came that gruff tone once more. "Mebbe what folks says is true, that killin' is killin', but to my fool' notion thar's some ways o' dyin' as tops 'way over some others. An' the meanest o' all ways is gittin' a feller's throat slit, 'long of his own dumb foolishin'—which is jest what!"

Hardress Knox could hear the shuffling sounds caused by both human and animal steps, but then the trampling of hoofs ceased, and all other sounds grew less, as though order was rapidly growing out of confusion.

That warning blade was kept against his throat for several minutes longer, only withdrawing when a low, indistinct voice spoke to his especial guardian.

Then strong hands picked him up bodily, bearing him a few feet, then seating him upon an irregular surface, which feeling told him must be the stump of a tree.

That heavy muffler was removed, letting the glow of a small fire fall squarely into his face, making his tingling eyes blink and wink again.

Only for a few seconds; then Hard Knox flashed a look around, giving vent to a low, fierce exclamation as he saw—what?

He was seated upon a stump, inside a patch of timber, which he failed to recognize in that first surprise; for he beheld a number of dark shapes surrounding him, all masked, all disguised in somber robes, each and every one grasping knife and pistol pointed direct for his person!

It seemed a grim travesty of scenes in which he had taken such a prominent part of late; but before he could express either surprise or anger, a slow sepulchral-sounding voice broke the silence.

"The court of justice is now in full session. Who appeared for the accused, my brother?"

"The ghosts of those he has so brutally murdered!"

"There is not the room for them all within our limits; they would crowd an amphitheater far vaster than—"

"Who the devil are you, anyway?" harshly interrupted the Vigilante Sport, rallying from his brief amazement, springing to his feet, only to find himself grasped by two pair of muscular hands and jerked back upon that uncomfortable seat.

"Who are we, do you ask, Hardress Knox?" repeated the first speaker, now coming more distinctly into view, one dark hand lifted in a slow, menacing fashion as he added: "Your judges, first; your executioners later on!"

"Show your faces, then, unless you are curs!" cried the Vigilante Chief in fierce defiance. "Let me see who dares—"

The bare blade of a knife flashed before his eyes, coming from the rear, and with its keen edge touching his lips, the prisoner dared not say more, just then.

As though all this was nothing more than expected, the black-robed accuser stood before the captive, speaking in coldly measured tones.

"You have run to the end of your rope, Hardress Knox, and now stand in the presence of stern justice. If you can clear your-

self of the foul crimes about to be charged against you, well and good: you shall go forth from this court, free of limb, sound of wind, bearing with you our most humble apologies.

"If you fail, on the contrary, you shall meet the reward befitting your sins; and may the powers above us all have mercy upon your sinful soul—for none awaits you here below!"

There was a brief pause, but Hardress Knox dared not break the grim silence.

That bit of steel pressed still closer to his lips, and sinewy fingers contracted yet more upon his neck.

A brief silence, then the sable accuser spoke further:

"Hardress Knox, you stand here accused of crimes sufficiently black and deadly to weight your miserable soul thousands of fathoms deep in the hottest pit of Lucifer's dominions—if true!

"You are charged with gratifying your private grudges under the cloak of justice; you have brought innocent men to the hangman's noose, merely to satisfy your hatred, thus doubling the sin: for you have acted thus while wearing the robes of justice!"

"If you deny the charge, instances can and will be given; but by following this course we hope to save both time and patience. So—how do you plead, Hardress Knox, Chief of the Wyoming Vigilance Committee: guilty, or not guilty?"

That bit of steel was removed, and the answer came swiftly, hotly:

"It's a lie, from start to finish! You're liars, all! Turn me loose—give me but a single hand to play with, ye craven whelps! But one naked hand, and I'll clean the court like—ab-h, ye cowardly curs!"

Those strong hands closed upon him as he sprung to his feet and in spite of his fierce struggles, the ranchman was forced back once more upon that rugged stump.

During it all, the accuser had remained motionless, making no sign of fear or of anger, and that cold impassivity affected the Vigilante Sport far more than the physical force he was meeting with.

Up to now he had deemed it nothing worse than a silly parody on the courts he and his men had been holding of late. The fancy even struck him that it was a clumsy practical joke, being played upon him by friends and neighbors, for such things had been done before.

But now—this surely seemed like grim and deadly earnest!

"You struggle in vain, Hard Knox," pronounced that cold, hollow-toned voice. "You have flourished long and evilly, but now you are nearing the end of your rope: and that rope ends in a noose!"

"Give me half a show, and if I don't clean out your whole gang, I'll go hang myself!" harshly growled the prisoner.

"You have had far too long a show, Hard Knox, and now comes the day of settlement! You have butchered right and left! You have prostituted your office by using it to pay off private grudges; and now—"

"I deny it from start to finish!" cried the Vigilante Chief.

"And now you must pay the penalty due your crimes!" coldly added the black-robed accuser.

CHAPTER VIII.

LYNCH-LAW FOR THE LYNCHER.

A cold sweat broke out upon the bared brow of the accused, for now he could no longer doubt the terrible earnestness of this court.

He was beginning to experience what many another man had felt, since the formation of the Wyoming Vigilantes, but he was facing a masked court which had been organized to convict!

A brief tremor ran through his athletic frame, but then he rallied, speaking clearly, more like one who feels he must plead rather than menace.

"I plead not guilty to your charges, sir. If I have caused parties to pull hemp—"

"If?" echoed the accuser, while a low, hollow laugh ran around that dark circle.

"I said it, and I stick to the same," doggedly declared the prisoner, nodding his

head defiantly. "If I have pronounced sentence upon men who deserved it by their law-breaking, I only spoke the words an honest jury placed in my mouth."

"Honest?"

"Prove it otherwise, if you can!"

"When those who could bear testimony are dead? Would members of your brutal gang condemn themselves by speaking the ugly truth?"

"I have served solely in the cause of truth and justice," firmly vowed the Vigilante Sport, his face paling a bit, but his face showing no other signs of fear or flinching. "If men have died under my sentencing, they richly merited the punishment measured out to them. I have no apologies to make to you, or any other, for I know I'm guilty of nothing worse than aiding a too sluggish justice!"

A pause and silence followed this sternly emphatic speech, then he who seemed to act as Judge Lynch slowly spoke again:

"Have you nothing better than this to offer, prisoner?"

"Isn't it enough? I swear that I'm—"

"A liar as well as assassin!"

Knox recoiled a bit, much as a man might from a vicious slap in the face; but then his ever fierce temper gained the mastery of prudence, and once again he strove to burst his bonds, lurching forward and striving to catching his accuser with his viciously clashing teeth.

Strong hands closed upon him from all sides, and tremendous though his efforts were, the hampered man was forced back, savagely cursing and pouring forth hardly articulate threats against them all.

The masked being who had filled the office of Judge Lynch betrayed no uneasiness, taking no part in that savage wrestle, merely stepping aside far enough to keep out of the crush.

Then, when Hard Knox was forced back to the stump, breathless but still defiant, he advanced again, to speak:

"You are fool as well as villain, Knox. Why kick so hard against the pricks? Is it so nauseous, this dose of your own medicine?"

"I'll medicine you!" panted the prisoner, just then powerless to do worse. "I'll kill you like curs who—"

"Better reserve your breath, Hardress Knox," came the cold interruption. "Better expend that breath in making your peace with an offended heaven, for your sands of life are running low—running terribly low and ebbing fast!"

"I'll outlive ye all, devils! Or—my men will make ye suffer ten thousand deaths for the one ye can measure out to me!"

A coldly mocking laugh came from those masked lips.

"Who will guide their blows aright? Surely not your hand, for that will be stilled in death long before the morning's sun peeps above the horizon! And—dead men tell no tales, as no doubt the Vigilance Committee over which you have for the last time presided, have so often congratulated their sinful selves!" mocked Judge Lynch.

"Who and what are you, all?" hoarsely demanded the prisoner, flashing a look around, but unable to distinguish figure or feature, so perfect were those disguises.

"Your judge and executioners."

"Thieves and Rustlers, why not declare? Ah-ha, ye devils! You've got me foul right now, but if I had only one hand at liberty—give me so much of a show, if you're anything like white men!"

The black mask lifted a hand, and the prisoner ceased speaking. A brief silence, then that cold and measured voice sounded once more:

"Who, am I, do you ask, Hardress Knox? One who knows the past as well as the present; one who has solemnly vowed to avenge the dead upon the living—yourself!"

Stepping closer, the masked shape bent with hidden lips toward the captive's ear, whispering fiercely:

"Remember Bessie Black, you demon!"

Hard Knox turned almost ghastly pale and shrunk visibly for a moment. But then he forced a rally, huskily muttering in reply:

"She died, and—"

"She was murdered, you demon!"

With pitiless emphasis came that sibilant whisper, but the accused betrayed less agitation, now, and in steadier tones spoke aloud:

"That's a foul lie, and if you know anything about the matter—"

"I know all about it, dog!"

"Then you know you are lying when you call it murder," steadily persisted Knox, looking more like his usual self as he added: "It was a terrible accident, but—still an accident! I nearly gave my own life in trying to save hers, and only gave over trying when my senses left me. I swear to this, now and forever!"

"And swear to a foul lie while taking the oath, you villain!" coldly retorted the accuser. "You tried to save her? Yes, but only after dealing the foul and treacherous blow which marked her poor face in death!"

"Who are you that claims to know so mighty much?" hoarsely demanded the prisoner, leaning as far forward as the grip of his guards would permit. "Show me your face, dog! Let me look into your eyes while I brand you liar and—dare you stand the test, then?"

"Who am I?" repeated the masked being, ignoring all that followed. "One who saw the print of your iron knuckles upon that brow when cold in death, Hardress Knox!"

"A lie—another foul lie! Her body was never found—"

"You lie—under a mistake, Hard Knox. The body was found, and given decent burial by friends; found with the print of your brutal knuckles upon her forehead—found with her skull crushed in by the dastard stroke you dealt even as she—Was the poor child pleading with you for her life and honor? Did you think to wipe out all wrongs, all sins, by adding another black score to your evil record, then?"

"You're crazy, man! I never—Bah!" turning his face aside like one who disdains further argument with an irresponsible adversary.

That voice had grown a bit husky, and showed signs of choking with powerful emotion, but this action served to bring back that briefly shaken nerve, and once more the measured tones were heard:

"You have broken all laws of earth and heaven in your time, Hard Knox, but that one deed alone is more than sufficient to sink your vile soul to the nethermost pits of Tophet!"

"Even if no other crime was laid at your door, that would fully justify any doom this court might see fit to pronounce."

"I refuse to recognize your right to either try or condemn me!"

"How many of your poor victims have said the same thing?" coldly retorted Judge Lynch, with a disdainful gesture. "How much attention did you or your bloodhounds pay their appeal, pray?"

"They deserved the fate measured forth to them, for never a man has felt grip or stroke of Vigilantes but merited all by transgressing the laws of our land," sternly declared the prisoner.

"And you are innocent, of course?"

"Innocent until proven guilty, fair and square—yes!"

"You have been shown more than worthy of death, Hard Knox."

"Who by, and how? By men who are too cowardly to show their faces even to one whom they have already doomed to death! Pah, you curs! Even with the death you threaten staring me full in the face, I'd a million times rather be Hard Knox than any one of ye all! And—oh, for just five minutes' freedom!"

"You shall have an eternity of freedom—in the grave!"

"Isn't there even one weenty spot of manliness among ye all? Not one among ye dare give me even the ghost of a show?"

"You have run your length, Hard Knox, and the time of punishment draws terribly near," coldly pronounced Judge Lynch, uplifting a hand as he spoke on:

"You have sinned past all earthly redemption, and now little remains but to save the other poor victims whom you have marked out as prey."

"I'll live long enough to add you to that list," defiantly cried the Vigilante leader. "Or, if I don't, my bully boys will

take up the score and wipe it out from top to bottom!"

"If that belief affords you any pleasure, hug it to your bosom while you can," quietly spoke the Black Mask. "Now, for a final word, Knox, since time is fleeting rapidly, and there remains much to be done."

"This was set for your wedding-eve, I believe?"

No answer in words, but the prisoner strove again to break away from his guards; now as before in vain.

"I know it is, so you need not answer against your will. That knowledge has shortened your lease of life a few hours. Only for the christian duty of saving the last fair maiden whom you marked as a victim—"

"I'll mark you, curse you, if I ever—"

"But you never will, Hardress Knox. Your time in this world is all too brief for winning revenge, and in the other—well, I'm no angel, yet I sincerely trust that you and I will occupy far different spheres, then!"

A low chuckling sound came from some of those grimly disguised shapes, but silence quickly followed that lifted right hand.

"This is stern and bitter earnest, no matter for jest, gentlemen. And to wind up the matter—listen, please!"

"You all have studied the record made during the past year by the accused. You all have decided as to his guilt or his innocence. Now: on your grave and solemn oath to perform your duty without fear or favor, gentlemen of the jury, what is your verdict?"

"Guilty!"

"What is your sentence, gentlemen of the jury?"

"Death!"

A brief silence followed that fatal word, broken at length by the one who acted as judge of the rude court.

"So mote it be! You have heard your doom pronounced, Hardress Knox, and now—what have you to say against its execution?"

"It's an infernal farce, and you are all dirty curs!"

"If a farce, 'twill end a tragedy," coldly declared Judge Lynch. "I bid you breathe a prayer for mercy on high, if your untrained lips can be so quickly schooled, for of mercy there is naught left here below!"

"You have lived by the rope, and by the rope ye shall perish! You have hanged many a poor wretch whose crimes are as snow beside your awful guilt, Hard Knox! Think of them, now, for your hour of eternal doom is striking—striking fast and sure! Think of the future, for ye are about to take the last, fatal plunge—to death, Hardress Knox!"

CHAPTER IX.

MAKING AN ENEMY USEFUL.

PERHAPS it would have been better for Hard Knox in the end, had he been less pressed for time on that important day, for then he might have lingered for another taunt before parting with his captive rival in love, and so lingering, made a momentous discovery.

For, driven to the very verge of madness by that mention of Fanny Gillespie and her impending doom, Perry Byrne seemed gifted with powers supernatural for the moment, and as he struggled fiercely to get at his merciless enemy, some part of his bonds seemed to give way!

That heavy door was closed before even the captive could realize so much, and then the prisoner lay quivering, panting, fairly overcome by that storm of rage and baffled vengeance.

Minute after minute passed thus, and it was not until after Knox had parted with Limpy Johns, mounting his gray gelding to keep the appointment made with Tom Curry, that Perry Byrne fairly recalled that—was it a fact?

He had been disappointed so often, had made so many desperate attempts to free himself without avail, that now the poor fellow hardly dared put that vague hope to the test.

Boldly as he had carried himself while in the presence of his ruthless foe, bonds and confinement were beginning to tell upon both body and mind. Already the young cowboy felt his nerve was failing him, and that he was less the man he had been when first falling into the evil grip of the Vigilante Sport.

But then returned the memory of those mocking words that very night was to witness the sacrifice of the only woman this wide world contained for him: was to make sweet Fanny Gillespie the wife of that arch-villain! Unless—

With a low, savage snarl at that ugly thought, Perry Byrne gathered his energies and strained his tempered muscles to the utmost.

There came a faint snapping sound, then those bonds slackened an inch or two; not much, yet sufficient to bring a cry of fierce exultation to the prisoner's lips, for he knew now that it was merely a question of time when he would stand up, free of limb once more.

It was true. That mad struggle had broken one strand of the rope with which his arms had been bound behind his back, and now persistent efforts contrived the rest. Before Hard Knox joined his spy, Perry Byrne had worked his arms free, and was busied with his other fastenings.

He had plenty of time to complete all this, for Limpy Johns, who alone remained on duty at the Spider Ranch, had naught to call him to that cell until after the final instructions given him by his master.

It was just as well, no doubt. Perry Byrnes had time granted him in which to grow cool-headed and clear-witted once more.

He knew that he could hardly hope to force that heavy door, totally unarmed as he was. And he knew, too, that even should he increase his liberty thus far, he would stand defenseless against the well-armed ruffians who owed allegiance to the Vigilante Sport.

Forcing himself to sit down and coolly reason it out, Perry Byrne was not many minutes in reaching his decision: he must eke out skin of lion with pelt of fox!

Limpy Johns had his own ideas of duty, and when Hard Knox had ridden away to claim his fair bride, the cripple gave a grunt of relief, then set about his own work after his own fashion.

As already stated, he was the sole hand left at the Spider, on that occasion, and though he was expected to remain on duty, as guard over the Dark Hole as well as guardian of the ranch, Limpy had no idea of losing all the fun on hand that night.

With this end in view, then, he cooked a meal rather earlier than was his habit, dishing up a liberal supply on a none too clean tray, then hobbled with this burden to the trap door, down the unseen steps, through the first cellar to the heavy door opening upon the Dark Hole.

That dim light revealed nothing wrong to his careless gaze as the cripple entered with his provisions, kicking the door shut behind him.

Perry Byrne was crouched in his corner, with bonds apparently in place, just as they had been at every "feeding time" since his first introduction to that vile cell.

"Waal, critter, got a good hungry on?" asked Limpy Johns, in a tone just a trifle less disagreeable than the one he usually used on such occasions, as he bent over to set down the tray.

"What time is it?" asked the prisoner, in husky tones.

"Time fer feedin' the hogs, so why don't ye grunt, critter?" pleasantly retorted the cripple, hobbling nearer that crouching shape. "Git a move on, dug-gun ye! Ef I'm to onhitch ye fer feedin', don't keep me waitin' like this!"

"Where's Hard Knox?" asked Byrne, slowly moving in obedience to that gruff command. "Why don't he come to—"

"Got a mighty sight better job, he has! Gwine to hitch double-teams 'long o' Kunnel Gillespie's gal, an' that's what's the matter with me! I'm gwine fer to take it in, my own self, like the rest o' the boys; for they's thar, an' t'others is thar, an' ef all that don't mean a he-ole holy racket afore the— Fire an'—"

The cripple stooped lower to remove those bonds as was the custom whenever the prisoner was fed, but as by magic the cowboy flung off his fastenings and caught Limpy Johns in his muscular arms, holding him helpless while forcing him back and over to hit that earthen floor with the broad of his back!

"Quiet, you hound!" fiercely menaced Byrne as one hand shifted its grip far enough to close upon that hairy throat, then contracting as though trying to make thumb and fingers meet through flesh and gristle. "Give even the ghost of a yelp, and I'll murder you!"

With anything like an even start, the result might have been different, for Limpy Johns had more than once proven himself a mighty tough knot to split; but now he was taken completely by surprise, and hardly struggled enough to make victory interesting.

Choking him down, then, Perry Byrne contrived to loosen that belt of arms, rolling the cook over until he held it in full possession, then springing to his feet with a revolver cocking as he sternly spoke:

"Get up, you whelp of Satan! Up, and do just as bidden, or I'll send you to serve the devil below, in place of the devil above. Up, I say!"

"Don't—don't shoot, boss!" huskily quavered the knave, crawling to his feet, lifting an arm to cover his face, now pale as that perennial mask of dirt and grease would permit.

"I'll open your head if you make a move without my 'say-so,' sternly vowed the ex-prisoner, keeping the cripple covered in spite of his shrinking and shifting. "Will you serve me for a few minutes, or would you rather have your roof lifted with a blue pill?"

"Don't—I'll do anythin'—ary durn thing, boss!"

"All right; but keep one point well in view, Limpy Johns. If you try to foolish me, by lying when I ask aught, or by moving left when I say go right, I'll kill you without further warning!"

"I hope I may die, boss, ef—"

"That's enough, you cur. Now—how many of the hands are about the place, right now?"

"Not a durn one, boss, wuss—that is, they've all done racked out fer to take in the circus at the Turkey—not a durn one!" desperately floundered the cripple, feeling very much like a man might who was surrounded by venomous serpents, ready to bite at his first false step.

"And your master: Hard Knox: where is he?"

"Gone—done gone, too, boss!"

Limpy turned paler than ever as he spoke, but not nearly so white as did he who asked that question. Only too well Perry Byrne knew what that answer covered: knew that the Vigilante Sport had ridden away to claim his fair bride!

With an evident effort the cowboy smothered his intense emotions, then spoke again:

"All right, Limpy. If you're lying, so much the worse for yourself, since I'll shoot you like a dog if we see or hear sound of any other man on this plantation! Now—don't forget that I hold the drop, nor that I'll use it without mercy if you give cause."

"I hope may die, boss, ef—"

"Go on. Lead the way out of this, and remember that the first crooked step will send you to Tophet! Show me the way to your master's office, Limpy."

In fear and trembling the cripple obeyed, and first satisfying himself that they were not likely to be interrupted for the time being, Perry Byrne stood his unwilling servitor up in a corner, face to the wall and hands elevated to their utmost stretch, then swiftly rummaged through the desk, which he forced open with the knife taken from his captured guard.

He was not long in finding what he sought, then called Limpy to come there, keeping him covered with a cocked revolver while pointing to a blank form lying on the lid of the desk.

"Sign your name right there, Johns, and sign it plainly, so all may read who cares. Lively, my man! I've got precious little time to waste over such as you!"

Meekly the cook obeyed, then sending him

back to his former position in the corner, Perry Byrne quickly filled in the form, giving a grim chuckle of satisfaction as he glanced eyes over it; a regular bill of sale, conveying horse, saddle, bridle and all equipage to render it ready for the road!

This done and the paper pocketed, Byrne forced Limpy to conduct him through the door into another apartment, which he knew was used as a sort of store-room. And here, as he had hoped, were found the belt of arms taken from his person the night he had fallen into the grip of the Vigilante Sport.

Buckling the belt on, discarding the weapons taken from the cripple, Perry Byrne forced Johns out of the house and across to the stables in which Hardress Knox kept his own choice saddle stock.

Of the three valuable animals remaining in that inclosure, the experienced cowboy selected one: a large, finely-proportioned black stallion, full of fire, yet gentle and biddable as a far older nag.

Under compulsion, for that loaded revolver kept perfect time with all his movements, Limpy Johns saddled and bridled this steed, leading it forth from the wide stall, and unable to keep from showing his yellow teeth in a vicious snarl as he did so.

"Ef he don't break your neck, thar's them that'll stretch it a foot longer fer stealin' of him—good luck!" he muttered, more for his own satisfaction than with the intention of regaling those ears.

But Perry Byrne caught the words, and spoke up quickly:

"Don't you fool yourself, Limpy! If I take the black, I've got a regular bill of sale for him, signed by— Look at it, will you, beauty?"

He suddenly thrust forth that partly printed, partly written form, and the cripple for the first time seemed to realize just what his own hand had helped in doing.

He gave an angry curse, but Byrne grasped him by an arm, swinging him half-way around as he cried out:

"A fair bill of sale, Limpy Johns, and—thus I pay you the price!"

Once, twice, thrice that booted foot flew forward, each kick sending the cripple forward at least a yard! And howling with angry pain, Limpy Johns suddenly broke away, running at his best speed, trying to escape!

"Stop, you fool, or I'll kill you like a dog!" cried the cowboy.

CHAPTER X.

A LOVER'S FORLORN HOPE.

Up to that moment the cripple had acted after a fashion so completely cowed, that Perry Byrne in a measure relaxed his watchfulness, else he would never have been taken off his guard in this manner.

As he called out sharply, his pistol hand flew up, the silver drop covering that fleeing shape as by instinct, and only the faint pressure of finger was needed to sound the death-knell for Limpy Johns!

But Perry Byrne was no assassin, and to shoot down an unarmed man would fall little short of that crime, no matter how utterly vile and worthless that fugitive might have proven himself.

Lowering his gun, with left hand snatching the coiled lariat which hung from the saddle-bow, Perry sprung forward in swift pursuit, preparing the lasso as he ran.

"Stop, you cur!" he cried again, then gave the widening noose a single twirl before hurling it forward.

Stopping short, he braced body and contracted arms, jerking the hobbling fugitive fairly off his feet, fetching him to earth on the broad of his back with stunning force.

That was the end of the unequal race, for ere the cripple could recover his breath, or make an effort to arise, Perry had him fast, holding him down with his knees while using that lariat to securely pinion the fellow.

"Don't, boss!" gasped the wretch, frightened nearly out of his wits just then. "Don't butcher me, boss! I never—I'll be yer houn' dog fer life, ef ye'll only—only—"

"Shut up, you cur! Button your lip, or I'll kill you for being such a cowardly fool!" sternly threatened the cowboy, drawing back a bit as he felt his captive was hampered sufficiently for the present.

But then a troubled frown came into his face. He flashed a look around through that gathering darkness, like one who feels at a loss what step to take next.

Time was passing rapidly, and that very evening was set for the sacrifice! He felt that he must hinder—that he must save Fanny and foil Knox; but how?

And what could he do with this wretched knave?

"I'd ought to kill you like a sheep-mangling cur!" he vowed, scowling darkly down upon the shivering cook. "You've treated me as no white man would treat a dog, and—why shouldn't I blow your brains out?"

A groan, howl, curse and prayer for mercy all combined came in confused jumble from those fear-blanching lips.

"Shut trap!" commanded Byrne, lifting a foot to place it upon those bearded lips. "I'd ought to send you over the range, but—I can't! I may be a fool for feeling that way, but—and yet you deserve some sort of punishment, too!"

A mumbled plea came from the cripple, but Perry Byrne paid it no heed. He was thinking, swiftly and earnestly.

He might stow the cook away in the Dark Hole, there to remain in limbo until his master or some of his fellows should find and release him; but would that be punishment enough for the brutal treatment he had so liberally bestowed upon his helpless charge?

"Not nearly enough! I'd really ought to kill the hound, but—I can't go quite that far! And yet—that's the ticket, after all!"

Like one who had at length found what he was striving after, Perry Byrne hurried off to a corner of the nearest corral; a rather extensive inclosure of boards and rails, used to pen the animals sorted out for daily service on the ranch.

Giving this a brief inspection, he returned, bending down to fasten a firm grip upon the cripple, speaking sternly as he began dragging the fellow over the ground:

"You've only yourself to blame for what's to come, Limpy! If you'd treated me even half-way white, I'd have paid you back in the same coin. But now—though I'll not kill you, myself, I'll make it mighty certain you never see the rising of another sun!"

Again the prisoner begged for mercy, vowing all sorts of repentance and amends for past deeds; but the ex-prisoner paid no attention whatever, working swiftly and systematically.

Winding that long lariat tightly around the cook, knotting it securely at ankles and elbows, he hurried off, to shortly return with a long, round pole, from which all bark had been stripped.

This he thrust through a crack in the corral fence, in a corner, one end passing under the cross-rail, the other protruding several feet, after passing over the beam on that side of the fence.

Bringing a second lariat from the stables, he fitted the noose about Limpy John's neck, then lifting the groaning, moaning wretch in his arms, contrived to shove him over and along the barked pole, in a sitting posture.

The limber pole bent beneath his weight, thus counteracting that upward slant, leaving it merely a question of time when the bound wretch should slip from his precarious perch.

"Lean back a bit, if you like, Limpy," chucklingly spoke the cowboy, as he relaxed his grip, leaving the cripple shivering astride the pole. "Don't take a tumble if you love your neck, though, for this rope will fetch you up with a round turn!"

Flinging the free end of the lasso over the corner of the fence, Perry Byrne hurried around to secure it there, drawing in the slack and letting Limpy feel the gentle strain, even as he sat tremblingly erect.

All this took time, for the cowboy had resolved no error should enter into his calculations; but finally he was satisfied, and pausing only long enough to mount the black stallion, he rode around to face his fear-racked victim.

"I'd give a big round dollar for your photograph, right as you appear now, Limpy!" he cried, mockingly, as he viewed his handiwork with grim approval.

"For love o' heaven, boss!" groaned the miserable knave. "Don't leave me to—I'm chokin' a'ready, boss! I can't star' this."

"Then take a tumble and end it all, Limpy!" mocked the cowboy, showing no signs of mercy. "I couldn't soil my hands by taking the life of such a worthless cur, though you treated me badly enough to justify a score of such killings! Still, there's no law in Wyoming against a man's committing suicide, and you—ha! ha! ha!"

His pitiless laughter rung upon those ears like a death-knell, yet still the craven knave begged and pleaded, vowing miracles if his life might only be spared.

"I've done my share, Limpy, and the rest remains with yourself," the cowboy said, in parting. "I've made sure you'll never break a leg through falling upon the hard ground, but Satan himself couldn't hinder your hanging if you will take a tumble! Now—so long, pardner!"

"Be good to yourself, Limpy. Try to pass away the time by recalling all the favors you measured out to poor me while in limbo! And—remember that your neck is safe so long as you keep your perch upon that pole, but—not one second longer!"

Wheeling his horse, the cowboy rode off at a rapid pace, soon passing from trot to gallop, for there were miles and miles of ground to cover before he could even hope to do aught toward rescuing Fanny Gillespie from a fate which he felt would be even worse than death.

And yet—even should he reach Turkey-track Ranch before the wedding service was complete—what could he do?

"I'll kill that evil demon, if nothing less will serve!"

Hoarsely, harshly that vow escaped his lips; but, even as he caught his own words, Perry Byrne found himself wondering how he could hope to accomplish even that much?

Time and again Hardress Knox had told him he was posted throughout all those vast ranges as a fugitive from justice, branded in the sight of all honest men as a cattle-thief, a stealer of horses, one of the now widely condemned and fiercely execrated Rustlers!

Even if he had lied as to this, how much better off would he be, under the circumstances? For himself, he had seen that the Spider Ranch was practically deserted, and if his men were there at the Turkey-track Ranch, how could he hope to win a way through their ranks?

"They'd kill or take me!" he muttered, forced to admit the ugly facts. "I'd never get within reach of that devil, alive! And yet—I'll foil him. I'll save my love, or die trying!"

The black stallion carried its new master swiftly over all those intervening miles, but rapid though their progress was, Perry Byrne had time sufficient in which to grow calmer, cooler, clearer-brained; and as he won his first glimpse of the Gillespie home, noting how brilliantly the buildings were lighted up, with numerous tiny figures flitting to and fro between himself and those lights, he drew rein and brought his good steed down to a walk.

Now that the crisis seemed fairly at hand, the lover was cool and strong nerved, his wits never keener, his brain never in better working condition.

As he rode cautiously forward, he was counting the chances for and against his hopes; but terribly though the odds counted up against him, he was far from feeling despair.

"If nothing less will serve, I'll shoot a passage through, and give that arch-demon my last shot!" he inwardly vowed.

Knowing how certainly the black stallion would be recognized as the property of Hard Knox, Byrne dismounted and hitched the animal while at some little distance from the house, then slouching hat and pulling his collar and neckerchief higher, he advanced, feeling ready for the worst, if worst it was fated to be.

The front doors were wide open, and Byrne could see that the "best" room had been decked for the ceremony; but he saw, too, that Fanny was nowhere to be seen, and the bridegroom was conspicuous through his absence.

He saw sufficient there to convince him that the ceremony had not taken place, and as a cowboy—one of the Spider hands, as he believed—came that way, speaking in off hand manner, he muttered something by

way of answer, then slouched off into deeper gloom.

Although he had hardly formulated a plan of action, as yet, Perry Byrne passed around to the rear of the house, looking up to the second story, where a light was burning, only partly veiled by the muslin curtains looped to either side of the window.

His heart gave a mighty throb, and something flew up in his throat as he caught a glimpse of a shadow on those curtains—a mere flitting from one side to the other, yet that was enough for a lover's eyes.

He knew that yonder light burned in Fanny's chamber, and knew, too, that the shadow was almost surely hers as well!

His lips parted to utter her name, but then he choked back the cry, for cooler reason warned him that other and far less friendly ears would surely catch his notes.

If Fanny would only come to the window! If he could only make her comprehend who was waiting and watching and yearning for sight of her sweet face, for sound of her dear voice! If he might only—

Why not?

Perry Byrne caught his breath sharply at the bold idea, and his eyes glowed even through that gloom as they roved swiftly over the "lean to" kitchen which stood at the rear of the house, its shingled roof sloping upward until it nearly reached the window where that dim light was burning, that dear shadow had showed itself so briefly!

An instant later Perry Byrne was catching the eaves with both hands.

CHAPTER XI.

PUZZLING OVER THE PROBLEM.

A BRIEF struggle ended with the lover climbing over the eaves, and then creeping as noiselessly as possible up the sloping roof of the lean-to.

The shingles were loose and warped by the protracted dry weather, and several times he was forced to pause, lest the noise he thus unavoidably made should call unwelcome attention his way.

But then he won close to that white-curtained window, resting on hands and knees as he craned head and neck forward, to peer eagerly inside, trembling like a leaf with poorly suppressed excitement.

At first glance the chamber appeared to be empty, and the lover's heart leaped into his throat with a suffocating throb of bitter disappointment.

Although he had hardly stopped to reason, his hopes had been steadily rising higher and growing stronger ever since he made sure that sacrifice was yet incomplete; and now, to have found only a fleeting shadow where he counted upon the sweet, precious substance!

Barely a half-dozen seconds, then Perry Byrne caught a slight sound coming through that half-open window, and a moment later the white-robed shape of Fanny Gillespie came within his limited field of vision.

She paused midway between the bed and the chamber door, seemingly undecided; but then, with a low, gasping sound, the poor girl turned back to sink upon her knees beside the bed, arms crossed upon that snowy cover, and face buried between them.

Was she weeping? Was she praying?

Perry Byrne now pressed close to the window, the looped curtains surrounding his bust like a frame, looking and listening, lips parted but hardly daring to break in upon that holy scene, as yet.

He felt that the poor child was praying for renewed strength to endure the sore trial just ahead of her on life's pathway, and madly as he worshiped her, dearly though he knew she loved him, the cowboy hesitated, like one fearing to commit sacrilege.

For several minutes upon her knees, and she might have lingered still longer thus had no interruption come; but the lover knew that he was liable to be discovered at any moment by some one of the numerous cowboys gathered at the Turkey-track, and he was just on the point of calling to the maiden, when the door opened and Mrs. Gillespie entered the chamber, speaking to her daughter as she did so.

Fanny rose hastily to her feet, and Perry shrunk back instinctively lest he should be

discovered by those other eyes, of whose favor he felt far from being certain.

"Has he come, mother?" Fanny asked, her tones sounding strained and unnatural to those eagerly listening ears. "Is it—oh, surely it isn't time for the—time, yet?"

"No, dearie," answered Mrs. Gillespie, meeting the sorely agitated maiden and folding her in her arms for a kiss, then gently smoothing a straying curl with a far from steady hand.

"He hasn't come? Oh, mother! If he should—if he should never come! I was trying to pray that—I did pray that something might happen to hinder his ever stepping foot upon this place again!"

"Is it wise, daughter?"

"I hate him—I always shall hate him, mother!" passionately declared the maiden, lifting head with a bright sparkle in her eyes. "I told him as much when he dared—"

Mrs. Gillespie gave a half-moan at this enforced sacrifice. Fanny flung both arms about her neck, kissing her wrinkled face between words:

"I know, mother, for he was brute enough to tell me; I know that it is all for poor daddy's sake, else—"

She flung out her hands with swift passion as she added:

"Only for that, would I ever have consented, as far as I have? For anything less than his dear life, would I even think of marrying Hardress Knox?"

"Don't, Fanny! You may be heard, and then—don't, pet!"

"Heard?" echoed the maiden, with sudden despair, her head drooping again. "Who should hear? Who is there left to hear, now Perry—oh my love! my darling! Why have you deserted me like this?"

To all of this the hidden lover had listened with growing eagerness and deepening interest.

Loverlike, there had been moments of gloom in which he doubted even Fanny and Fanny's true love; moments when he felt that she, together with all the rest of his one-time friends, had proven false, misled by the cunning lies cast forth by his unscrupulous rival.

And now, while he longed to spring forward and clasp that dear form closely to his heart, he was held back by that ugly doubt; held in check until enough was said to convince even a jealous lover that absence had only rendered him more dear to the girl he worshiped.

"Fanny, darling!" he called through the window, in clear yet guarded tones, still cool-witted enough to remember how thickly he was surrounded by enemies. "Don't cry out: it's Perry—it's your own true lad!"

Both women started and uttered sounds of affright, but that swift speech went far toward reassuring them, and as the lamplight shone fairly upon that well-known face at the window, Fanny gave a low, gasping sob of joy, her trembling hands flying out in that direction.

Active as a cat, and almost as silently, Perry Byrne passed through the opening, and stood erect within the chamber, to clasp his beloved one in strong arms, raining hot kisses upon her face, for the time being oblivious of aught else.

Although Mrs. Gillespie was hardly less amazed by that coming, she was first to take precautions against discovery by others, quickly letting fall those white curtains, then hurrying across to the dresser and turning lower the lamplight.

Perry Byrne gave an abrupt start as her hand fell upon his shoulder, but there was nothing worse than friendly anxiety to be read in the care-worn face upon which his eyes rested as he looked around.

"Why have you come here, Perry, so late?" she asked, her voice both husky and unsteady. "It is too late, now, and—"

"It's not too late, mother!" he interrupted, half-fiercely. "I'd rather kill Fanny than see her sacrificed to that murdering hound!"

"And I—I'd welcome death from your hand, Perry!" murmured the maiden, nestling closer to his heart, her arms clinging tightly to him. "I thought you dead—I knew they lied when they swore you had run away because— Oh, the false hearted scoundrels!"

"It is too late, children," persisted Mrs. Gillespie, tears showing on her lashes as she watched. "Oh, lad! why didn't you act when— If you had only run away with Fanny when you might! But now—"

"I claim her against Hard Knox—against all the world!"

"And by so doing, send her poor father to the gallows!"

In strained, barely articulate tones came those dread words, and they drew a sob of despair from Fanny, a start of angry surprise from Byrne.

"Who can do that?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

"That merciless—I mean Mr. Knox," and Mrs. Gillespie corrected herself, with an anxious look toward the chamber door, through which just then came sounds of merriment from the rooms below.

"That lying cur?" scornfully cried the lover, tightening his embrace as he moved a bit nearer the still open window. "If he made any such threat, 'twas but another of his black-hearted lies! He only did it to frighten you women, and— Come, Fanny! You are mine, before Heaven and all mankind!"

"Yours, now and forever, darling!"

A low, triumphant laugh broke from the lover's lips, but Mrs. Gillespie caught an arm before he could act further.

"Stop, you foolish children!" she commanded, in tones that sounded far more stern and authoritative than usual. "You think only of yourselves, but I—God help me guard my poor husband!"

"I'll help you guard him against Hard Knox and all his devils, mother," quickly asserted Byrne. "Just say that Fanny shall be mine, and I'll be the one to meet that scoundrel when he asks for his bride!"

"No, no, Perry, he'd murder you!" faintly gasped the maiden, weighing heavily upon his arm in her sudden terror.

"And I say the same: no, it can't be that way!" gravely declared Mrs. Gillespie. "Even if you were lucky enough to escape with life—"

"I'll make sure of that villain before going under, anyway!"

"Even that wouldn't save Jerome," came the swift addition. "You don't know—you can't know, but I do! There's only one way of saving my husband, and that is—Fanny must keep her pledge this very night!"

"What! marry that villain?"

"Better marry him than kill her father!"

The cowboy lover gave his head an impatient toss, angry at making no better headway. Turning from the mother to daughter, he kissed her warmly, then swiftly muttered:

"Will you trust me, darling? Go with me now, before worse trouble comes between us! Go with me now, and you shall be my sweet wife long before the sun rises in the morning!"

Her lips met his, clingly, and then he urged once more:

"Will you trust me, darling? Will you go with me—now?"

"Yes! I'll trust you, Perry; I'll go with you now and forever!"

A low sound of wild joy came in his throat and the cowboy lover clasped the maiden in his arms, moving toward the window; but once again Mrs. Gillespie interposed, catching an arm as she almost harshly cried:

"Stop! take another step in that direction and I'll give the alarm! Stop, I say!"

Perry Byrne bit his lip, sharply, but paused in obedience to that command, for he could not help seeing how terribly in earnest the wife then was; wife, since she seemed to think of husband rather than daughter.

"What can you mean, Mrs. Gillespie? Surely you said if I'd carry her off, 'twould be best of all things?"

"If you had acted then, yes; but now it's forever too late! Matters have gone so far that the whole blame would be placed at our door, and husband would have to pay with—with his very life!"

Her voice caught, but she forced herself to utter the words. From what Hard Knox had let drop at one or more of his brief visits to the Dark Hole and its inmate, Perry

Byrne could give a shrewd guess as to what lay back of those unsteady words.

And Fanny, too, had memory quickened by her mother's words, and with a low but choking sob she reached up to kiss her true love, then tore herself from his arms, sinking upon her knees at the side of the bed, bowing her head as if in silent prayer.

It was a doubly bitter blow, coming as it did just when he had won the consent of his sweetheart to fly with him, a heavy blow, and right plainly did the lover show its effects.

Womanlike, Mrs. Gillespie was softened by sight of his grief, and moving a little closer, she gently patted his arm, speaking tremulously

"I wish it might be different, Perry, but how can it? Jerome never broke the law, even in thought, but Hardress Knox has seeming proofs of his guilt, and holds the rope of the lynchers over our heads, swearing that no less a price shall buy him off!"

"The cowardly hound!"

"He's worse than that, but what can be done? If you had only taken the poor child before all this happened! If you only had, our kindest prayers would have gone with you; but now—it's too late!"

CHAPTER XII.

A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK.

THE ranchman's wife bowed her head in trembling hands, weeping silently, the hot tears trickling through her thin, worn fingers.

For a brief space Perry Byrne stood motionless, his eyes passing from weeping mother to praying daughter, then coming back again as he strove for a fair solution to that puzzling problem.

More powerfully than ever was he tempted to catch the maiden up in his arms, bear her through yonder window, over the slanting roof to the ground, then hurry to where his confiscated stallion was in wait, there to mount and race away through the night, to win a wife or lose a life!

Only the one thought checked that reckless impulse: he knew that Mrs. Gillespie would raise the alarm the moment he made such a break, and in the fierce fight which such an alarm would surely precipitate, Fanny might prove to be the sufferer.

And yet—better death for them both than stand apart to permit such a foul outrage! Better slay her with his own loving hand, than cast her shudderingly into those evil arms!

Then, as another softened burst of merriment came from below, Perry Byrne caught at a hope, and eagerly grasping an arm of the grieving mother, he swiftly spoke:

"You say Fanny mustn't go with me, mother, but if I took her plainly against your will? If I was to carry her off, at the muzzle of my guns?"

"I don't—what do you mean, Perry?"

Fanny likewise caught those words, and with a new-born hope she sprung to her feet, hands tightly clasped as she gazed upon her lover, never looking more handsome than he did just then.

But before the cowboy lover could say further, a quick yet heavy step echoed on the flight of stairs leading from the ground floor, and instantly recognizing the tread, Mrs. Gillespie caught an arm, pushing its owner toward the curtained window as she agitatedly whispered:

"Go, go quickly! It's Jerome—it's my husband, coming to see why we're waiting so long! Go, I beg, Perry! He'll kill you if—"

But Byrne shook off her hand, and instead of taking to flight by way of the window, he strode across to where Fanny was standing, pale and frightened, drawing the maiden to his side with left arm as he grimly faced that door.

"I'll not run like a cur, mother! If I can't take her with me, best have it out right now!"

"Don't harm—oh, heaven!"

"I'll not harm your husband—her father—but neither will I throw away my last chance of winning my wife!"

All this came and passed with wondrous rapidity, but there was time for nothing more. Already the knob was turning, and

then the door swung open and the tall form of Jerome Gillespie crossed that threshold.

He stopped short in his tracks, for almost the first object his eyes rested upon was the face of Perry Byrne, showing pale above the sunny head of the maiden who now lay almost swooning upon his breast.

For the space which might be measured by a single breath not another move was made, not a single word was uttered; but then the ranchman jerked forth a revolver, cocking it as the weapon flew to a level, his voice harsh yet subdued as he uttered:

"Steady, there, boy, or I'll blow ye through and through!"

Perry Byrne never flinched, although he could look straight into yonder black muzzle, and knew that only the weight of a finger separated him from certain death.

But others took swift action: Fanny drew herself up so as to cover that manly form as much as possible, while Mrs. Gillespie sprang in between the two men, both women begging for mercy.

"Don't shoot, father!" the wife said, one hand pushing aside the menacing weapon, the other reaching past to close the chamber door, lest sounds of anger or of strife reach unwelcome ears below stairs.

"It's Perry, daddy! He isn't—he is—"

"I'm your friend if you'll let me, Mr. Gillespie," gravely declared the cowboy lover. "At all events, I'm not your enemy, no matter what action you may take in this sad affair, sir."

Weakened in both body and will by the trials he had undergone of recent days, the ranchman was disarmed by his wife with comparative ease.

Instinctively he glanced toward the door, then turned both knob and key, after which he sunk into a convenient chair, bowing head in joined palms, shivering like one shaken by an ague.

Kneeling at his side, arms about his bent form, the wife quickly explained how Perry Byrne happened to be in that room, and as she ceased, the cowboy lover took up the dropped thread.

In a few crisp sentences he told why he had been absent so long and unexpectedly, then told just what his present coming meant, if all might go in accordance with his ardent wishes.

"You know I've worshiped Fanny for an age, sir," he huskily vowed. "You know, too, that her heart is just as surely mine, while she hates Hard Knox worse than poison! Now—will you insist on her ruining all our lives, just to humor that treacherous hound?"

Jerome Gillespie shook his head, giving a muffled groan.

"He's a devil—all devil!"

"And you would sacrifice your only daughter to such a devil?"

The ranchman groaned again, bending lower, more abjectly.

"How can I help it, boy? He's a devil, and I'm under his thumb! If I even try to kick, he'll send me up a tree, too mighty quick!"

"Say that he can't have Fanny, and I'll go your bail against Hard Knox and all his whelps!" sternly vowed the cowboy lover. "I'll kill him like the dog he's showed himself, and then—"

"That wouldn't save me, worse luck!" declared Gillespie, but dropping hands and straightening up, looking far more like a man. "He's taken care to guard against anything like that, or I'd have dropped him in his tracks, days and days ago!"

"Just how, sir? In what way can he hold such absolute power?"

Gillespie flashed an uneasy look around that chamber, licking his parched and feverish lips with his tongue before he could force himself to explain.

"I swear I never done it, Byrne! I swear by all that's good and holy I'm innocent as Fanny, there!"

"Then what have you to fear from his threats?" bluntly asked Perry.

"Well, he's been laying for this a long time, now, and he's got manufactured proofs; he's got enough to run me up a tree if they ever come to light! And he swears that he's placed them where they'll be published to all the world if I don't—if there comes any slip-up in his schemes, through my actions."

Huskily came the conclusion, and the ranchman bowed his head despondently. Just then he looked far more like one guilty than one wrongfully accused; but the women held perfect faith in him, and Perry Byrne was far too busy trying to see light through darkness to be critical, just then.

After a brief silence, the lover spoke, firmly:

"Try if you can't see some plan to cheat that devil, in spite of his threats and his imps. For, I say it squarely: I'll never resign Fanny to Hard Knox, so make the most of it!"

Again a brief silence, and again the cowboy lover was the one to break it.

A ray of light seemed struggling through the mists, and a bold, reckless, yet not entirely unpracticable scheme was coming to his busy wits.

"He hasn't come yet, then, Gillespie?"

"Who? Not—oh!" ejaculated the ranchman, giving a start and stare like one suddenly roused from a dream.

"Hard Knox; he isn't down below?" repeated Byrne.

The ranchman shook his head in negation before speaking:

"No, not yet; and that's what's bothering 'em all, down-stairs. He ought to have been here long ago, but—"

"So much the better for our side!" cut in the lover, with a grim smile curling his mustache, eyes beginning to glow and sparkle vividly.

Mrs. Gillespie rose to her feet, a ray of hope showing on her worn features as she gazed intently into that handsome face.

"Don't be too rash, Perry, only—if you can devise any plan by which you can save both child and husband, I'll love you forever!"

"Well, I'm going to try it on, anyway," declared the cowboy, with forced calmness, studiously keeping eyes from that fair young face, for just then he felt that he must retain full possession of wits and nerve in order to crack that terribly hard nut.

"You're bucking against worse than the devil, boy!" muttered the despondent ranchman, shaking his head dolorously. "I've given up all hope, and you might as well—"

"Don't you think that way for a moment, sir! I'll beat the whelp yet, and fool him out of both bride and victim, never you fear!"

"How can you do it, though?"

"If I can arrange to carry Fanny off, under my guns, you'll not hinder, Gillespie?"

"No, but—he'll smoke the trick, curse him!"

"Not if you act your part as I lay it down, sir," was the confident assurance. "First, can you depend on your own men to remain quiet; that is, they'll not block my passage at the wrong time?"

"Yes, if you can show me how to put them on guard, without letting any of the Spiders smoke the trick," declared Gillespie.

"Name your best man; I mean the one you can trust with the secret, of course. There is such a person?"

"Yes. There's Mark Diggs. He'd wade through fire to save Fanny."

"Good enough. You go down-stairs, and find Diggs as quickly as possible. Send him to prepare Fanny's horse for the road, and then let him pass the word to his mates to block the way of all save us two! *Sabe?*"

The ranchman nodded his head, looking far more like his olden self since hope was reviving within his bosom. He left the room, hurrying off to perform his part of the plot for a bride!

All knew there was no more time to waste, for Hardress Knox was long since overdue, and might put in an appearance at any moment, now.

"He'll pay the heavy debt he owes me, if he should come!" Perry Byrne declared, as Mrs. Gillespie expressed this dread. "But for all your sakes, I hope he'll delay yet a little longer. After I've claimed my bride, and have her fairly in the saddle, let them catch as catch can!"

Bidding Fanny change her dress as swiftly as possible for one more suited to a night in the saddle, the cowboy lover added a few minor directions, then took the maiden in his arms for another kiss.

Mrs. Gillespie passed over to the dresser, turning the lamp still lower, until all was shrouded in nearly complete darkness.

"God be with you, my dear boy!" she murmured, brokenly, as Perry gave her a warm hand-clasp, then moved toward the curtained window.

"Be down-stairs as quickly as possible, and try to act just as you would if nothing was about to happen," he hurriedly whispered in parting; then slipped both feet out through the open window.

As his feet touched the sloping roof, he remained motionless for a brief space, listening to the woman closing that barrier behind him.

He slid down a foot or two, pausing again as a loose shingle cracked and rattled; a sound that seemed to echo far and wide that still night!

Instinctively Perry Byrne looked around to see if the alarm was given, and his heart leaped suddenly as he sighted a dim figure on the ground below, covering him with a revolver!

"Stiddy, dug-gun ye! Show cause, or I'll blow ye to Kingdom come!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BLACK PHANTOMS OF THE PAST.

"THINK of the future, for ye are about to take the last fatal plunge—to death, Hardress Knox!"

As those words passed his lips, the sable-marked shape acting as Judge Lynch of that grim court, lifted a hand in token, and a few seconds later two of his fellows brought forward a wild-eyed, nervous-looking horse, holding the creature with evident difficulty as they came to a halt in prompt obedience to another gesture.

"Hard Knox, you have been fairly tried and duly sentenced to meet death this night. You have hanged far better men than you ever dared be, on a thousand-fold lighter proof of guilt than has been fastened upon you. You have—"

"Oh, cut it short you infernal fraud!" harshly cried the condemned, still betraying no evidence of fear or of weakening nerve. "You've settled it all in advance, so why prate of justice? Go on with your rat-killing if you reckon there's no hereafter!"

"Whether there be or no, ye shall judge for yourself very shortly, Hardress Knox," coldly came the retort. "Through the fruits of the rope ye have lived, and by the rope ye shall perish!"

"To work, brethren!"

Those silent shapes sprung into swift activity, some preparing the horse for the part it seemed destined to play in that tragedy of the night, others casting lariat over a long since chosen bough which shot out at right angles with a sturdy trunk, almost directly over the spot where Judge Lynch had been standing.

This much the Vigilante Sport was permitted to witness, but then Judge Lynch gave another sharp command, and before he could even guess what was coming, a thick hood was flung over his head and drawn down past his neck, to be tied firmly just above his elbows.

He fought, but vainly. The odds were too great, and those bonds so hopelessly hampered him.

"Fool!" and the voice of Judge Lynch sounded more sepulchral than ever as it penetrated that heavy muffler. "Why strive to prolong the agony? Why struggle when all is vain, and naught ye can do will alter or even retard the doom that has been spoken?"

"Hardress Knox, ye have sinned almost past repentance, yet there may still linger the ghost of a chance for your miserable soul, if you pray swiftly and fervently! Pray, you poor sinner, for your punishment is about to begin!"

Muscular hands closed upon his person, and in spite of his struggles the prisoner was lifted bodily from the ground, swung upward and forward, then settled fairly astride a waiting horse.

He could feel the animal yield slightly to his weight, and through the saddle could feel it tremble as though only held from leaping away in anger or affright by powerful hands at head and on reins.

A noose was deftly cast about both feet, his ankles being drawn as nearly together as the body of the horse would permit,

then knotted securely. And an instant later the cold loop of a lasso fell over his head, to close uncomfortably snug about his neck!

He made one more effort to break away, crying out fierce threats and vicious curses the while, but with no better result than before. The noose only drew more tightly about his throat, and the resistance told him the other end had already been made fast after passing over that bough above his head.

"Fall back, brothers, and leave the doomed assassin to his fate!"

It was the voice of Judge Lynch, and instantly all hands fell away from his person, leaving him seated in the saddle, with noose-encircled neck, and naught between him and death by hanging save the horse!

Should it start forward, or break away, only one result could follow. He would be left dangling clear of the earth, to die the grimly horrible death of slow strangulation!

He expected a final taunt from Judge Lynch, but none such came to his ears, and only indistinct sounds pierced that muffling hood, which shut out even the faintest glimmer of light.

He caught dim, seemingly far-off trampling of hoofs, but only for a few seconds, and barely long enough for him to determine that they were receding, rather than coming nigher.

Then—all was silent as death, save the heavy throbbing of his own heart, the dull pounding in his skull as the hot blood flowed to and fro with feverish violence.

The saddle creaked faintly beneath his weight, and the sound sent his heart fairly into his throat.

Was the horse crouching for a leap? Would it spring ahead, eager to free itself from that helpless burden? Would it—God of heavens!

For the first time he recalled how securely his ankles had been drawn together beneath the belly of the horse, and with awful distinctness a frightful picture presented itself to his burning eyes.

A horse pulling one way, that rope the other, with him between!

How would it end? Which rope would yield first? Or—would head be torn from body in that sickening strife?

If he had been left the use of his eyes, Hardress Knox might have fared better, but deprived even of sight, muffled in that suffocating sack, unable to see and barely able to hear, his torture was doubled.

It was like a strong man suddenly blinded: he feared the invisible, and a quickened fancy added false terrors to those which were real.

That hideous dread sent a convulsive shiver running through his frame, and then he felt fresh fear lest the fiery steed take the slight movement as a signal to advance!

With a desperate effort of will power he checked that shivering, sitting as motionless as though turned to stone. And that seemed the hardest of all!

If he could only fight against his bonds! If he might have leave to strive and struggle, to put forth all his strength against the bonds by which he was so cruelly hampered!

But, how dared he do that?

His first movement would almost certainly start the horse off! And while the creature seemed much more subdued in spirit now than it had been when first brought into the little circle of death, the first step it took would bring a pressure to bear where that rope connected ankles, and that would surely act as a spur!

Then—death by strangulation!

Not until now did Hardress Knox fully realize what an exquisite torture that pitiless enemy, whose face was hidden behind a sable mask, had invented for his particular punishment!

Hanging alone was bad enough, surely, but this waiting in utter darkness for the fatal moment; this hideous certainty that death must surely follow his first effort to evade that doom; that he would be his own hangman; there lay the sharpest torture of all!

And—what face was hidden by that mask? What enemy could be have whose revenge would be glutted by nothing less devilish than this?

Then, as through a sudden flash of light, the truth seemed to dawn upon his brain, and he could not entirely smother the fierce cry which memory sent to his muffled lips.

"Bessie Black!" Right there lay the clue, and in swift succession a series of life-pictures passed through his throbbing brain.

Years had crept by since that time, low down along the division line between Texas and Mexico; but it all seemed startlingly distinct and painfully real to his senses, just now.

She was the only daughter of a rough old skin-hunter, who had married a woman of a much higher grade in life, although there was a strong trace of Indian blood in her veins.

The sole living daughter, but not the only child Bessie Black had a twin brother, in all save temper so strangely alike that even their own parents could not always distinguish them apart, when, as children, the twins roguishly changed garments for a time.

Bessie and Jesse! How vividly he could recall their faces and figures now!

And then Hardress Knox lived it all over in memory, scene after scene in swift succession coming and passing, making a strange commingling of light and shadow, of love and hatred, of innocence and guilt!

He recalled how he had fallen recklessly in love with "Black Bess," as he at first almost mockingly called the dark-eyed senorita. He remembered how fiercely Jesse resented his insolence, and how, partly because of that very interference, he plunged over head and ears in love with Bessie Black, then coaxed her to run away from home with him, to get honestly married by a friendly monk, in deference to her religion.

There was hot chasing and fierce fighting at first, but when her relatives knew the lover was actually a husband, a truce was patched up, although the brother never offered hand in sincere forgiveness.

Then, possession soon meant satiety, and Hardress Knox began to call himself a fool—or worse! And from thinking how much better 'twould be to be a free man as of old, he fell to wondering how that boon could best be brought about.

The breach grew wider when his neglected wife grew fiercely jealous, for her complaints were not always well-founded, although Heaven knows she had cause enough to accuse him of falsity to both her and his solemn vows.

Then—the ending came after a year more of wedded strife: came one bright fall day at a northern lake, whither the "loving couple" had wandered in quest of amusement and renewed health.

The end came while they were out boating together. Bessie accused him of wronging her, and when he laughed in mockery, she sprung at his throat, fierce as a tiger-cat, trying to stab him with the dagger she had carried in her bosom for many months past.

A brief struggle, then—a cruel blow with clinched fist upon exposed temple; a stroke that was half instinctive, half premeditated; a blow that knocked the woman overboard, gasping painfully, the dagger escaping her quivering fingers as she slowly sunk out of sight beneath the waters!

Hard Knox leaned over the side of the boat to watch that sinking, but he made no effort to hinder: although there was both time and opportunity for him to do so, he never reached forth hand to rescue his wedded wife!

Then a sudden gust of wind came, upsetting the round-bottomed boat, and that gave him the cue: an accident!

So it was given forth when Hardress Knox was found at the water's edge, lying nearly insensible, worn out by the tremendous efforts to rescue his beautiful wife!

For days he lay like one hovering on the brink of an untimely grave, while his liberal reward offered ample inducements for searchers; but a week passed without the recovery of the body; and then leaving instructions behind in case of its later recovery, Hardress Knox took his departure, the picture of gloom and sorrow.

Only a couple of days after that departure the body was recovered mainly through the efforts of an old, rough-toned man and pale-

faced, dark-eyed youth who bore a startling resemblance to the missing lady!

Not for nearly a month after this discovery did the news reach Hardress Knox, but then he hurried up to the pleasure-resort, and caused the grave—marked simply by a wooden cross—to be opened.

He saw enough to satisfy himself that no mistake had been made: although fearfully altered, that face was still recognizable, while the jetty locks were even more readily identified.

Turning away from that gruesome sight, Hardress Knox paid for all, including a costly monument, then took his departure forever.

All this flashed swiftly across his brain, and following it came the too-brief sight he had that same day caught of the "Prairie Kid."

Surely death had claimed the reckless rider? And yet—could he have escaped both death and Vigilantes? Could it be that he was the masked shape acting as Judge Lynch? And—

"It's Jesse Black—it's Bessie's twin brother!"

It seemed like a revelation of truth, and as it flashed upon him, The Vigilante Sport gave both start and cry, for the moment forgetful of his own precarious situation.

The horse gave a little start, lifting its head with a short, subdued whimper; and thus recalled to his peril, Hardress Knox spoke soothingly, huskily:

"So-ho, lad! Steady, boy! Quiet, for love of—"

The sharp snapping of a dry stick, coming from no great distance away! The sound reached the prisoner's ears even through his blinder, and with a wild hope leaping up in his bosom, Hardress Knox cried aloud:

"Help! Save me, friend! For love of heaven grab this brute and—help, if ye be man or half-white!"

There came no immediate response, and he was about to break forth in a still more urgent appeal, when quick footfalls were heard, and then strong hands closed upon his person, while a harsh voice came to his ear:

"Yaas, we'll save ye, dug-gun ye, Hard Knox! We'll save ye—like a hongry houn' saves a hunk o' taller! Hey, pardner?"

CHAPTER XIV.

A PUZZLE FOR THE PRAIRIE KID.

THE Vigilante Sport had been right in one respect, at least, for he who acted as Judge Lynch for that especial occasion was none other than the Cowboy Chief, while Old Pap Ryan served as his faithful coadjutor.

Leaving Hard Knox seated upon the horse, with his neck encircled by a death-noose, the Kid led his little company away from the spot, no word passing between them until that timbered spot was fairly lost to sight in the gloom of a moonless night: for that silvery luminary had not yet showed her face above the eastern range.

Drawing rein, then, the Prairie Kid swept eyes around the limited range, bending head as though listening for some unusual sound.

None were to be heard, and rising erect in the saddle, the Kid spoke to his followers like one who had but to command to be obeyed.

"You deserve my thanks for the manner in which you have played your part so far, men; but the good work has only begun!"

"Jest p'int us out what comes next, boss, an' we'll do'er up so pritty brown you'll think she's bin all fresh painted!" declared one of the riders.

"Good! I like to hear you talk after that fashion, men, for it shows me I've made no serious mistake in selecting timber. Now—the first thing to be done is for us all to scatter, breaking our trails as much as possible without wasting too much time. When the truth is known—when that is discovered, as it surely will be before many hours, the whelps of yonder master-hound will spare no pains to find out through whose agency Hard Knox came by his death!"

"That's heap sight mo' of the same medicine left in stock, boss!"

"Which we will administer in fit doses when the proper time rolls round, never fear. But, now we've got the ball to rolling,

let the good work go on! Blow must follow blow, with stunning force and awesome rapidity, else the Vigilantes will rally to sweep us off the face of the earth!"

"Waal, we'll ketch a bite while they're gittin' a squar' meal, anyway, I'm reckonin', Kid!"

"Enough!" with stern emphasis. "It's for you to listen while I'm talking, and so—this is for you, men!"

"Scatter and break your trail as much as possible, but all come together at the Spider Ranch. You will find it deserted, or nearly so. The hands will all be at Gillespie's, to see the circus, as they term it."

"Once at the Spider, you have your work marked out for you. Strip the corrals of every hoof and horn! Make a clean sweep, as ye so well know how! Head for the old cover, and we'll be with you before trouble can catch up!"

"And you, sir?" asked another of the men.

"Have more important business on hand just now," was the impatient answer. "Go, now, and get rid of those duds; we'll hardly need them again, and they've already paid for themselves!"

In obedience to his commands, the party separated, a few to head after a bit for the Spider Ranch, but others, acting on a prior understanding, to hasten in an almost opposite direction, or for the Turkey-track Ranch instead.

Prairie Kid and Old Pap Ryan kept together, and for a few moments they rode on in utter silence, each seemingly buried in thought.

The younger adventurer was first to show signs of growing uneasiness, and finally his horse was sharply checked, its master speaking:

"It's no use trying longer, Pap: I can't do it!"

"Can't do what, Kid?" asked the veteran, although it was evident he more than anticipated the answer.

"Leave him yonder, to—I can't do it, I say!"

"The wuss blame come your way, then, Kid!" sternly cried Ryan, leaning over to grip an arm with his bony fingers. "Think o' all the bitter wrong he's done! Think o' the dirty work he kivered ye all over with! An'—think o' the dead, Kid!"

A low, inarticulate cry broke from the younger rider, and for several seconds speech seemed impossible. But then the Prairie Kid said:

"I do—I am remembering the dead, Ryan, but—if yonder horse should break away—"

"What of it?" fiercely muttered the old man, tightening his grip on arm until the Kid flinched, involuntarily. "Hain't the bloody whelp o' Satan deserved all he'd git then? Ay, an' more, too! He's done 'nough fer to live a thousan' deaths! You know it, Kid; or, ef ye don't, then ye'd mighty ought—so thar!"

With an effort the Prairie Kid twisted his arms free, partly turning his horse around as he spoke in reply:

"I do know all that, Pap, but when I think of what would happen in case the brute should break away in spite of the hobbles we put on—"

"Thar hain't no show fer the critter to break away, Kid, an' you'd know jest that, ef yer brain was cool an' stiddy as it orter be," doggedly persisted Old Pap Ryan. "You see'd how we hobbled the hoss a'ter changin' the young critter fer the old one, while Hard Knox was bein' blinded. But, ef he should break away, what matter? The devil's imp would only hang, jest as he's hung heaps o' mighty sight whiter critters!"

"That's just it!" cried the Prairie Kid, with sharp decision. "He would hang, and that's far too short and easy a death for such a sinner! Come or stay, Pap; I'm going back to make all sure!"

With those words the young avenger wheeled his steed and headed direct for the spot where Hardress Knox had been left to meet his doom; and though a surly, sulky growl came through his grizzled beard, Old Pap Ryan followed his beloved master.

As the timber tract was neared, their pace slackened, and even the Prairie Kid seemed less eager to win another sight of the Vigilante Sport; but then, dismounting and leaving their nags at a safe distance, out of

earshot of any person who might be in the timber, the two men stole rapidly but noiselessly forward.

The wisdom of this precaution quickly became evident, for some little time before they reached the right spot, sound of human voices came to their ears; voices which arose from the very opening selected for the mental torture of Hardress Knox!

"Let me go fu'st, Kid!" muttered the old man; but he might as well have spared his breath, for the Prairie Kid almost rudely shook off that restraining hand, stealing forward all the more rapidly, yet with the silent step of a hungry panther creeping upon its prey.

One minute later they crouched at the edge of the opening, now fairly lit up by a little fire, built upon the coals of the one by whose red glow Hardress Knox had stood trial for his life before Judge Lynch.

The Vigilante Sport was still in the saddle, still bound and unable to help himself, while near him were a couple of rough-clad fellows who seemed bent on torture before killing.

One was cutting the rope hobbles which had hindered the meek horse from moving under its blindfolded burden, the other was pricking the prisoner with the point of a fiery stick, fresh from the flames.

"Mebbe 'tain't quite so bindin' as the quirts you gev us, critter, but when she comes to pullin' hemp—ready, pardner?"

"Yaas; git ready fer to whip the critter to a jump, an'—"

The Prairie Kid waited for no further proof, but leaned forward with leveled revolver, intending to make sure of the nearest ruffian; he with the glowing brand.

But the branch his left hand grasped, broke suddenly, causing him to pitch forward, his first shot tearing up the mold only a few feet ahead.

With wild yells the two ruffians broke away, followed by swiftly humming lead as the rescuers broke cover in chase, Prairie Kid in advance, but with Old Pap Ryan close to the youth's heels.

Just as he was clearing that opening one of the cowboys pitched forward, all in a heap, shot through and through. His mate sped on, ducking and dodging, with the two men in hot chase which lasted for several minutes.

Then, as both sight and sound was lost, they slowly retraced their steps to the opening, where another still greater surprise awaited them; Hardress Knox had vanished!

The horse still stood in place, and the severed rope dangled above the empty saddle; but that was all!

For a brief space the two men seemed fairly stupefied; but then they both sprung into action, trying all they knew how to solve that puzzle, making rapid circles with pistols in hands, looking for tracks as well as those who should have left such signs behind.

But it was labor spent in vain, for nothing could be read in the opening, where so many feet had covered every yard of ground, and outside the darkness proved an effectual hindrance.

Nor was there much to be gleaned through examining the body of the fallen cowboy, lying at the edge of the glade. He proved to be one of those flogged by the Vigilance Committee that same morning, and doubtless had come by chance upon the helpless Sport, then playing for revenge on the one who had sentenced his back to the biting quirt.

"It's double-cussed luck, Kid!" gloomily muttered Old Pap Ryan as they ceased their vain search, to interchange puzzled looks. "Ef I'd 'a' hed my way—but what's the use?"

The Prairie Kid raised a clinched hand as though registering a mental oath, but only an inarticulate sound escaped his lips, just then.

He sprung away on a still wider circle, searching for the mysteriously missing captive as a hungry panther might hunt a hiding hare; but only to meet with utter disappointment once more.

"Come, Pap!" he cried, huskily, turning away from the scene of his foiled vengeance. "He's gone, now, but there's one sure place to look for him, and if I can't get there first, I'll still come in time!"

"Time fer what, Kid?"

"Time to save her! He shall never ruin another fair young life!"

CHAPTER XV.

A COWBOY LOCHINVAR.

Not loud but uncomfortably came that challenge, and though he was by no means a craven, Perry Byrne shrunk from that leveled weapon, lying still closer to those dry shingles as though he would thus lessen the mark and the probability of being "drilled."

Even in that sore extremity he took thought for his loved one, and flashed a look that way, to see the chamber darkened, and the window closed to all sound.

"Stiddy, I tell ye," repeated the voice from below, and now Perry Byrne took note that the tones were guarded, just as though he who spoke was as desirous of avoiding a general alarm. "I've got yer dead lined, an' kin shoot to a needle-p'int! Show cause, or—"

With that odd expression came recognition, and with both a strong sense of relief.

"Sh-h! That you Diggs?"

"Who's you, fu'st-off, critter?"

"A friend to all who— Keep me covered if you like, but I'm coming down to see—"

"Show up, fu'st, dad-burn ye, critter!" and the voice grew sterner, even more menacing. "Who be ye? Sing sweet, or out goes yer light!"

"I'm Perry Byrne, and your young mistress is— Quiet, man!"

The sturdy fellow below choked off that cry of amazement, and feeling that his chance was now or never, the cowboy lover slid swiftly down the roof and dropped to earth, hurriedly saying as he did so:

"Button up, if you love Miss Fanny, pardner! You're not dead stuck on Hard Knox, old man!"

"Well, I ain't plum'liar 'nough fer to say so, but—"

"Then help us black his eye and save Miss Fanny at the same time!"

Using as few words as possible, yet knowing the time would be well spent in making Mark Diggs fully comprehend the situation, Perry explained what had and what was still to happen, winding up by asking him to prepare Fanny's saddle-horse for the road with as little delay as might be.

The cowboy listened with interest, but at that request he shook his head doubtfully, slowly speaking in his turn:

"That's all right, pardner, ef it is right, but—"

"Don't I tell you it's right, Diggs?"

"Ef jest sayin' was shore makin', it'd be a turrible sort o' world, pardner," sagaciously commented the cowboy, one hand dropping upon Byrne's shoulder, almost as though he was an officer making an arrest. "Not 'lowin' to hint as how you're lyin', mind ye, pardner."

"Then why not take my word for it all, and so save precious time?"

"Waal, talkin's cheap an' easy both. I'm free to own up that I like you a heap sight mo' than I do Hard Knox, youngster; but thar's the boss, an' he's the one to think of, fu'st. See?"

Perry gave an impatient shrug, shaking off that hand, as he said hurriedly:

"Go get your orders from Gillespie, then, though I warn you you're adding to the risk your young mistress is running! We've got to get her away from here before Hard Knox comes, or else— Go, then! Don't make too much show of talk, or it may be remembered after the circus!"

Still sorely puzzled to understand it all, Mark Diggs yielded his own judgment far enough to slouch off around the house, followed closely by Perry Byrne.

Almost the first man they glimpsed as they came to the second corner, was the ranchman himself; and a few seconds later the cowboy was listening to a few swiftly whispered sentences, the result of which was to send his last doubts glimmering.

During that brief interval Perry Byrne was looking to make sure that his rival for the hand of Fanny Gillespie was still missing, and if he had any doubts lingering, they were speedily dissipated when another fellow in rough and ready range garb brushed up against him, speaking in lowered tones:

"Hellow, pardner! Durn queer the boss don't show up, hain't it?"

Byrne mumbled something, disguised by a husky cough which seemed to assail him,

just then; for he recognized one of the Spider hands, and knew trouble would surely follow a return recognition.

Passing on, he kept an eye on Mark Diggs, and when that honest fellow parted from Jerome Gillespie, he lost no time in joining him, to ask in a guarded whisper:

"How goes it, pardner? Satisfied, yet?"

"Bet your sweet boots I be, boss! Holy persimmons! Ef I could jest open my lungs an' belch up all I'm feelin'! Ef I could jest whoop up a whooray big's the glory is stirrin' into me!"

"Choke it down until— You'll get her nag, then?"

"You bet I jest will, boss! But, fu'st, to ginger up the home-boys, an' let 'em know they're to shinny on our own side!"

"How many can you depend on, Mark?"

"Every dug-gun one, when it comes to buckin' the Spiders! Ef 'twas anybody else, mebbe not so dead shore; but Hard Knox—he's p'izen!"

"Good! I'll help you out, Mark, for there's mighty little margin to play on, remember!"

Separating, the two men set to work with hearty good will, each selecting one of the Turkey-track men, giving brief instructions, then bidding the good word pass on from their lips as well.

There was nothing to hinder this sort of movement, fortunately. The strange delay in coming of the bridegroom-elect had caused general wonder and not a little uneasiness outside, as well as within the house.

Men were moving restlessly about, talking it over to first one and then another, making little or no distinction between those friendly to the Vigilante Sport, or those outwardly neutral, for none were openly opposed to Hard Knox, just then.

Under cover of this general uneasiness, then, Perry Byrne and Mark Diggs found little trouble in carrying on their secret campaign, and in less than ten minutes the Turkey-track force were prepared to do their negative part when the crisis should come.

"It's all right, so fur, boss!" assured Mark Diggs as he rejoined the cowboy lover, out in the lessening gloom, for the round moon was just beginning to send its silvery rays over the high ground to the east. "Ef it comes to a racket, you kin count on our lads blockin' the road!"

"Good enough! Now, Mark, you know where I left my nag?"

"You bet ye!"

"All right, again! Get it, together with Miss Fanny's nag, and have them ready to rush up when I come to the door. You understand?"

"Jest as ef I done said it my own self, boss?"

"Don't forget that on your clean work may depend her safety, old man; and— but we'll talk of paying scores later on!"

A hearty grip of honest hands, then Perry Byrne looked to his guns, making sure all chambers were filled and everything in smooth working order.

He hoped to pull through without shooting, but shoot he would if necessary, and with such a precious prize at stake, he could not afford to neglect any precaution.

Moving swiftly, yet without inviting especial notice, the cowboy lover pressed up to the still open front door, pausing for a few seconds just without the threshold.

He saw a number of guests, both male and female. He saw the tall, gaunt figure of Jerome Gillespie standing near the center of the room, with wife on one side, daughter on the other, all looking paler than usual, though that seemed natural enough, so long as the bridegroom expectant was missing so unaccountably.

Perry Byrne saw Fanny turn a veiled look toward the open doorway, and drawing a revolver with his right hand, he sprung swiftly into the room, shoving Jerome Gillespie rudely aside, his left arm clasping the slender waist of his sweetheart.

"Steady, all of ye!" his voice rung forth sternly, that business-like weapon swinging quickly back and forth as though to catch the drop on all within its range. "I'll kill the first to interfere! This is my sacredly pledged bride, and I'll hold her mine in spite of all the world!"

It was a complete surprise, and seemingly

none felt it more than the father and mother of the girl who clung tremblingly to the cowboy lover, just then.

There were cries and exclamations of amazement, and more than one masculine hand instinctively moved toward the place where guns were ordinarily carried, but which had been discarded for this occasion.

"Steady all!" again rung forth that clear voice in stern warning. "This is my love, my bride! I'll kill the first man who dares lift a hand or take a step to bar my passage!"

Until now the very picture of amazement, Jerome Gillespie seemed to rally his scattered wits as the bold cowboy began moving with his fair prize toward the front door.

"Perry Byrne! Stop—stop, man; or I'll shoot you like—"

At the first word Byrne covered that gaunt form with his gun, but as the ranchman did not recoil, even moving forward, he swiftly altered his aim, turning that grim muzzle toward the daughter, instead!

"Back, man!" and now his voice sounded harsh and strained, his face pale as death, but his eyes glowing as though backed by living fire. "I can't shoot you—her father! But neither will I lose my wife! Back, I say, Jerome Gillespie, or her blood be on your head!"

The ranchman recoiled with a hoarse, inarticulate cry, pale and trembling, so intensely natural was that acting.

"Don't—Spare them, boy!" wailed the mother and wife, flinging herself upon the ranchman's breast, one arm about his neck, the other reaching out with an imploring gesture.

"Don't crowd me, please!" sternly warned the lover, moving toward the front door once more. "Make way, all! This is my bride, living if I can win her clear, but—my bride, even in death!"

"Make way, I say! Rather than lose her now, I'll blow her brains out and then die fighting the whole crowd of yel!"

It was no longer acting, but intense reality. None who saw that face just then could for an instant doubt the lover's perfect sincerity as he made this savage vow; and the mother's cry rose high above the surrounding confusion:

"Don't stop—don't murder my darling child!"

The strain was too much, and she sunk swooningly in the trembling arms of her husband, while Perry Byrne strode swiftly to the door, lifting voice in a ringing shout as he stepped over the threshold.

True to agreement, a grotesquely disguised man rushed a couple of horses up to the front, and with excited cries and cheers the hands of the Turkey-track Ranch surged after, shoving aside all others not in the secret of this audacious stroke for a bride!

Easily as though handling a child, Perry Byrne swung Fanny Gillespie into the saddle of her own special riding-nag, and then sprung upon the other, brandishing a cocked revolver as he cried aloud:

"Fair play, gentlemen! This lady is my promised wife, and as we once vowed to live for each other, so now we swear to die in company rather than be separated. Now—open a passage, or I'll shoot my way through!"

A united surge of the Turkey-track force opened a way, but just at that moment a wild yell came through the night, and then a voice cried:

"Look out! Hard Knox is on deck!"

Another savage shout, then the vicious bark of a revolver!

CHAPTER XVI.

A BRIDEGROOM IN HARD LUCK.

THE moment he recognized the voices of the cowboys and suspected Rustlers whom he had sentenced to the lash only that morning, Hardress Knox gave up all hopes of winning clear with life.

The next few minutes were full of mental and physical torture for the helpless Vigilante Chief; and yet, strange as it may sound, he felt a certain degree of relief now that awful silence was broken, and he was in the presence of living beings, not ghastly spirits.

While one of the knaves kindled up the fire, his mate tormented the prisoner, re-

peatedly vowing that he should stretch hemp in a minute or two; and fully meaning as much, too!

Unluckily for their revenge, the fellows dallied too long, and just as the hampered horse was set free from the hopples which had held it almost as motionless as though carved out of wood, the thunderbolt fell upon their own heads.

Still bound, still blinded, Hard Knox could hear little and see less. Neither sense was of much avail, and after his recent luckless experience, he hardly dared cry out for help, lest that firing prove to be by bitter enemies rather than friends.

But then a hand closed upon his thigh and a swift voice came up to his ears as he felt the thongs drop away from his ankles.

"Quiet, pardner! Not a yelp, or those—steady, now!"

He felt the owner of hand and voice leap upward, and the noose tightened about his throat for an instant; he felt a grating, jerking sensation, then that strain relaxed, and strong hands literally jerked him clear of the saddle, that same voice sounding again:

"Come, Hard! We've got to rack out, or those devils—Not a word, man! If they catch us before—Lean on me, and—Lively, man!"

The still blinded Vigilante was urged away from that firelit spot, given no time to speak or to think.

"Quick, man! They'll be back in a second, and then it'll be shooting with all the show on their side!"

After this fashion Hardress Knox was hustled away until some little distance from yonder glade in which he had met such a disagreeable experience; and not until then did the rescuer take time to remove that muffler, or to cut away the rope which hampered the Vigilante Sport's arms.

And not until then: not until his limbs and eyes were once more under his full control, did Hard Knox recognize the man to whom he owed his liberty, if not his life.

"You, Tom Curry?" he ejaculated, hoarsely, brushing hand over eyes as he leaned forward a bit the better to overcome that gloom.

"Just me, pardner," came the equable response as hand met hand in a hearty grip, though the smaller man was looking back the way they had come, rather than into that face. "I reckoned—There it is, now!"

From the firelit opening in the timber came fierce cries of rage as the discovery was made of that empty saddle and severed noose.

"They've smoked our little trick Knox," said Curry, with a dry chuckle which was cut short by the vicious oath let fall from those mustached lips.

"Give me a gun, Tom! Curse the whelps! Give me a gun, I say!"

Curry deftly evaded that rage-blinded clutch, then asked:

"What for, Knox? You don't mean to—"

"Those curs! I'll show them how a white man can pay off a score like the one they've been running up on me! Hark!"

Again those angry sounds, subdued by distance and intervening timber, yet unmistakable in their import.

"Give me a gun, I say, man! Or—must I go jump the hounds with only my naked hands to back me up?" fiercely raged the Vigilante chief.

"Not a gun, pardner!" firmly vowed the other man, drawing back as Knox advanced. "Don't be all fool, man, dear! There's a whole gang of 'em back yonder, and 'twould be sure death to tackle the lot, good man as all the range knows you are."

"I'm good enough to pay my debts, and this is one—don't make me take the gun by force, Curry!"

"You'll take the lead, first!" sternly warned the smaller man, and his left hand touched breast while his right drew forth the weapon in dispute.

"What! surely you wouldn't shoot a pardner, Tom?"

"If I didn't, others would, you hothead," half-mockingly retorted Curry, stepping back a pace, then replacing his gun in its holster. "Come, old man: we can't afford to quarrel, and you're not going to rush back yonder to get your eternal quietus!"

Hardress Knox stood irresolute, looking

back in that direction, but then as Tom Curry grasped an arm and urged him further away from those ominous sounds of busy search, he sullenly yielded.

Curry hurried him along for several minutes, only pausing again when a spot was reached where discovery in that gloom, and without their own consent, would be almost impossible.

By this time all sounds of the enemy had died away, and they could only conjecture what was going on back yonder at or near the scene of rescue.

Hard Knox gave a surly growl after listening for a brief space, and turned half-savagely upon his rescuer, to say:

"I'd feel heap sight more like thanking you, Curry, if you hadn't blocked my playing even, back there!"

"You'd be past thanking anybody if I hadn't fooled you, old man," came the cool retort. "You heard those yelps? Well, didn't they sound like the pure quill?"

"Who gave 'em, though? And how did you happen to run in on us just in the nick of time, Tom?"

That was his first actual symptom of either gratitude or curiosity, and it was tolerably fair evidence that his vicious rage was dying out.

Tom Curry was listening intently, like one who is hardly assured all peril of discovery is past; but then he drew a long breath of relief, moving a bit closer to the man whom he had so deftly helped cheat the hangman's noose, speaking easily:

"Well, old fellow, 'twas just one of those odd 'happenstances' which sometimes occurs, don't you see? I was on my way over to the Turkey-track Ranch, when—"

Hard Knox gave a little start and ejaculation, for those words recalled the old suspicions which had bothered his brain that same afternoon. And then he sharply cut in, with the query:

"Where'd you put in the time, Curry? I thought you said you were heading for Gillespie's when you left me, to-day?"

"That's all right, pardner," coolly assured the real or reputed cowboy. "I'm not working for you by the hour, am I?"

"No, of course not; but—"

"Then you can't demand an itemized schedule of my days and nights, I take it, Knox," with admirable coolness. "All that interests you is just this: I put in my time so that I happened along here when my services were most needed by my very good friend, if not master, Hardress Knox, Esquire!"

The Vigilante Sport shifted uneasily on his seat, then muttered:

"I wish I knew just how to take you, Curry!"

"Take me for better, and you'll never find me much worse, pardner," was the half-earnest, half-mocking response. "But, as I was saying, when you cut in, I happened along this way, and catching glimpse of a glow where a fire isn't customary, I stole that way to investigate."

"Those devilish Rustlers kindled it up."

"I reckon. Anyway, I got there just in time to see that you were in a mighty awkward hobble, and was studying how I could best get you out of it, when another party chipped in—red-hot, too!"

"What party? Who were they, Curry?"

Instead of a frank response, Curry hesitated, pretending to have his attention attracted by some sound from out the night.

But the wits of the Vigilante Sport had not been entirely idle during those past few minutes, and he gave a surly growl, then the words:

"I know, now! 'Twas that devilish Prairie Kid! I thought I had heard the voice before, and now I know it! 'Twas that whelp of Satan!"

"Who is he? What is he, Knox?" asked Curry, it being his turn to exhibit a more than common degree of interest. "I thought you said he was dead—drowned, wasn't it?"

"I thought that way myself," declared the Vigilante Chief, rising to his feet and giving himself a rough shake. "Come, mate: I'm long overdue at the Turkey-track, and I can't afford to waste more time. You don't happen to have a horse handy, do you?"

"Nothing better than shank's mare."

"Curse the crooked luck, anyway! It's

good three miles to Gillespie's, and I ought to have been there a couple of hours ago, at the very least!" sulkily muttered the ranchman, moving away through the night after a keen look at the starry vault above, to make sure of his course.

Tom Curry easily kept pace with the ranchman, and for several minutes neither spoke. But then the smaller man betrayed the subject of his busy thoughts, by asking:

"Who is this Prairie Kid, anyway, Knox?"

The Vigilante Sport turned swiftly, leaning that way and peering into the face of his companion as though he would read there the truth.

But he met with no reward, and in his turn demanded:

"Don't you know who he is, Tom Curry?"

"No, I don't. Would I ask you for information if it was in my own possession, man, dear?"

"Well, you might, for a blind!" still suspiciously peering.

"Then I tell you, on the dead level, pardner: I don't know who or what the fellow they dub the Prairie Kid is. Do you, Knox?"

"No, but I'm going to find out, you just lay your life on that, old man!" sternly declared the bridegroom elect, again quickening his step as he added: "Now for the Turkey-track! I'm hardly fit for the show, but I've got excuses enough, gracious knows!"

Nothing was seen or heard of those who had saved the prisoner, only to lose him at the same time, and nothing happened to delay them further save the fact that Haddress Knox, like all who almost live in the saddle, showed himself anything but an accomplished pedestrian.

Taking everything into consideration, that had proven a disastrous evening for the bridegroom elect, but still worse lay in advance, though Haddress Knox never even suspected aught of the bitter truth.

As the two footmen topped the swell from whence their first glimpse of the Gillespie home could be taken, they saw the place well lighted up, with human figures, greatly reduced in size by distance, hurrying to and fro between them and those lights.

"Looks as though something had happened, don't it, Knox?" muttered Curry, an echo of wakening curiosity coming into his smooth voice.

The Vigilante Chief made no reply, but broke into a run, covering ground with rapidity, yet all too slow to keep pace with his fierce passions, just then.

And as he drew nearer, he recognized Fanny Gillespie as strong arms swung her into the saddle; he distinguished the man who likewise mounted, and giving a savage yell of rage he raced on, with Curry forging up alongside. And then he snatched a revolver from Curry's belt, firing at his rival, only to go down himself at the same instant, stricken senseless by a heavy blow from an unseen hand!

CHAPTER XVII.

A WEDDING AFTER ALL.

THE cowboy Lochinvar was already in motion when that pistol-shot rung forth on the night-air, the left hand grasping the rein of the maiden's horse, the other holding the revolver in readiness to make good his threat of "shooting a road through," his knees guiding the black stallion which had so recently owned Hard Knox as sole master.

True to the pledge given by Mark Diggs, the hands of the Turkey-track ranch kept all others from blocking the way, without too openly betraying their concerted action, their yells and shouts and conflicting advice adding largely to the confusion which seemed to rule over all.

That bullet went widely astray of its intended game, through no fault of the viciously-enraged man who fired it, however; but it served to lend point and emphasis to that cry; was it warning, or through exultant partisanship?

"Hard Knox! The Vigilante Chief! Hard Knox is coming!"

Again and again that name was sounded, but it was not until the lovers had won fairly clear of the ruck that Perry Byrne distinctly caught the full force of those cries.

When he did so, he checked both horses,

half-turning in saddle to look back, while a cry came through his lips, savage and hot.

As by instinct the maiden divined his half-formed purpose, and with panting cry she leaned toward him clutching an arm as she spoke:

"No, no, Perry! You must not—you shall not! That awful man—"

"I'll not run from him, now you're safe, Fanny! He'll call me—ride on, darling, and wait for me until—"

The cowboy wheeled his horse, but Fanny did likewise, her tones firmer, more resolute.

"He'll murder you, Perry! If you go, then I'll go with you!"

"Rack out o' this pardner," just then came a friendly call, and honest Mark Diggs, still in his grotesque disguise, came trotting up to where the lovers were. "Skin out, I say, or dog-gun ef ye don't git skun!"

"But Hard Knox—"

"Leave him to us, pard, an' you look out fer the gal! Good luck ride with ye—but dum little use o' wishin', ef ye don't act a'cordin'! Git, or they'll smoke the trick, an' then—he'll be a-b'ilin'!"

Even then Perry Byrne hesitated, his blood on fire, his pride fighting against both love and prudence.

Back yonder the uproar was increasing, and he could still catch the name of his rival for that fair hand.

He knew that Hard Knox must be somewhere there in that turmoil, doubtless looking for him, and—'twas hard to ride away like one fleeing through craven fear!

Then a shot was fired by some one, and that seemed to be the match to explode the magazine.

For weeks, if not months, evil passions had been smoldering, rival factions had been forming, and now that a fair opportunity offered itself, there was not lacking those bold enough to accept the issue.

Fanny Gillespie gave a cry of mingled fear and repentance, and remembering how nearly he had lost her, once before, through indecisive action, Perry Byrne flung aside all other thoughts, and once more grasping her rein, he urged both animals into a swift gallop, turning his back upon the Turkey-track Ranch for a time, or it might be forever!

From that one shot arose scores of other explosions, while yells and shouts, cries and curses filled the air, going far toward making Mark Diggs's words seem prophetic: just then Pandemonium seemed let loose!

Fanny was sobbing, fearing for the safety of her father, but Perry Byrne was too wise now to stop for that. To turn back now would almost surely prove fatal to his hopes of making this maiden his wife, and he held fair faith that, after all, the wild uproar was little more than a concerted scheme on the part of the Turkey-track lads to the more effectually cover that elopement.

He said as much to reassure the girl as they galloped onward under the stars, their way now more clearly lighted by the broad face of the nearly full moon; and so well did his tongue perform the duty assigned it that Fanny quickly "braced up," urging their flight rather than retarding it.

That wild uproar lasted only a brief space, dying out almost as suddenly as it had burst forth; and Perry Byrne checked their animals to look back and hearken, with anxious eye and ear.

Not a sound could be heard from the direction in which lay the now invisible ranch. Not a moving shape could be distinguished, although the bright beams of the moon now widened the eye-range considerably.

That very quiet gave Byrne fresh uneasiness, and his handsome face showed sternly troubled as it met those anxious eyes.

"What is it, Perry?" asked Fanny, her voice quavering a bit. "They are not—What is the matter, dear?"

For just then her lover urged both horses on, turning to the left, on a course almost at right angles with that they had been taking.

"Nothing wrong, little woman," declared he, with well-feigned joy in both voice and face as they rode onward. "The racket is over, at home, and that means your father is all right and safe!"

"Heaven grant it! But—why this way, Perry? I thought—Surely this isn't the shortest road to town?"

"Do you reckon Hard Knox will give you

up, pet, without at least a try for his prize?" asked the cowboy lover.

"No, but—"

"We started as though heading direct for town, and as that's the shortest cut to a railroad, won't he naturally look for us that way, first? By taking this route, we'll not only fool his calculations, but we'll be able to— Fanny?"

"Yes, Perry?"

"Squire Jones wasn't at the house to-night, was he, pet?"

There came no answer in words, but the moonlight betrayed a rosy blush, and leaning across that brief space, Perry Byrne clasped the yielding form in his arms, kissing both lips and eyes repeatedly.

Then, as the two horses ambled along as though yoked in double harness, the exultant lover spoke again:

"That's another reason why I shifted our course, precious! I swore that you should be a wife before another sun, and now—Will the good squire serve our ends, darling?"

Fanny murmured something about the magistrate being sick, but her feeble objections were effectually smothered after true lovely fashion.

They were deeply in love. Each had suffered mental tortures during the past few days, when they were helpless, and their arch-enemy was carrying matters with a high hand.

Little wonder, then, that they should enjoy those first minutes of freedom, of coming bliss!

But the awakening came right speedily, and with a little cry of renewed apprehension, Fanny freed herself from that ardent embrace, looking backward as she spoke, unsteadily:

"Hark, Perry! I hear— Oh, they are chasing us!"

The rapid thump-thumping of hoofstrokes on the prairie sod now came quite distinctly to the ears of both lovers, and as Perry Byrne turned in his saddle, drawing a revolver, he could tell that but a single horseman was upon their trail: or, at least, that but one set of hoofs were within hearing, just then.

"Don't be scared, pet!" he grimly uttered, making sure his gun was in perfect condition. "There's only one, and I can—Yonder he comes!"

A single horseman could be seen just topping the slight swell a few rods to their rear, and that he possessed eyes fully as keen as was quickly made manifest.

He raised both hands to the full extent of his arms, calling out as he came dashing down the slope toward the lovers:

"Don't shoot, Mr. Byrne! I'm a friend, and—"

"Halt, then, and give an account of yourself!" sternly commanded the cowboy, sending his mount a few yards nearer the new-comer.

But Fanny's eyes or ears were more acute, just then, and with a glad cry she rode level with her lover, saying:

"Oh, Perry! It's Mr. Payne— It's the minister who—"

"Peace, good friends, and permit me to explain why I have followed you so closely," spoke the new-comer, only slackening his pace as he came up alongside.

The maiden had not been mistaken: it was the Rev. Zenas Payne, the Methodist minister chosen by Jerome Gillespie to conduct the wedding ceremony that evening.

"Father—mother—nothing has happened to them, sir?" tremulously asked the girl, shivering with an awful dread as she gazed beseechingly into that strong, clean-shaven face.

"All was well with them when I took horse," came the quick assurance, though it was almost as quickly qualified by the grave addition: "Well in body, I should say, but sorely grieved in mind, because— May I speak my mind without disguise, friends?"

"If you can lecture and ride at the same time," a little bluntly said Byrne, once more getting under way. "Since you found us, others may try the same, and— Well, they must come like an army to cheat me, now!"

The minister raised no objections, riding along with the lovers for a minute or two in silence, as though composing his thoughts for the proposed lecture. Then it came,

grave, yet kindly, thoughtful, yet not without a certain degree of sternness which made a deep impression upon the minds of both lovers.

He pointed out the peril which they were both incurring, as well as that through which they had so recently passed; and then he added:

"Your mother begged me to ride after you, Miss Fanny, and she bade me give to you both the united blessings of your parents; but—dare I offer them to you, Mr. Byrne?"

"Why not, sir?" demanded Perry, his face burning at that thinly veiled hint. "I was heading for the house of Squire Jones, hoping to make Fanny my wife before—"

His hand was caught and gripped warmly by the minister before that sentence could be finished, and then Zenas Payne spoke earnestly:

"Let me take his place, my dear young friends! It was with that one hope Mrs. Gillespie begged me to follow after you, and now—may I marry you to this gentleman, Miss Fanny?"

The maiden shrunk away, both frightened and confused; but Perry Byrne eagerly caught at the chance of making his prize certain.

"Yes—a thousand times over, yes!" he cried, gripping Payne's hand with crushing force, then turning to slip an arm around the shrinking maiden, drawing her closer to his side as he added: "I will be just as legal, just as binding as though we stood up in a church, before the altar, darling! Won't it, sir?"

"In every sense of the word, yes," came the earnest assurance. "And by so uniting you in the holy bonds of wedlock, my dear child, I can safely add the blessings of your parents. You should give them a thought, my dear girl, and if only for their sakes—"

"Now—right now, sir!" cried the lover, his eyes glowing with more than love alone, as was proven by the addition: "Marry us right now, and then I'll face the whole crowd, back yonder! As my wife, trust my hands to hold and guard my own!"

"Stop!" sternly reproved the minister, his tones altered wholly. "If that is your spirit, sir, I retract my offer. To go back now, facing Mr. Knox and his partisans after what has occurred, would be equivalent to opening hostilities; and with all in present mood, that would surely lead to fighting, if not slaying!"

"Not if they kept to their own side of the road, parson!"

"Give me your word of honor that you will not turn back: promise to avoid all trouble with your enemies as far as lies in your power: or I will refuse to marry you to this lady. More, I will take her under my own protection, until she can be restored to her parents," gravely and sternly declared the minister.

Perry hesitated for a bit, but Fanny stole a hand into his, and the soft pressure from her trembling fingers decided him to swallow his pride for the present, and he yielded with good grace.

"You're in the right, Mr. Payne, and I give you my word of honor to keep ahead, instead of turning back. Now—we're ready, sir!"

So was the parson, and as the trio rode onward at a walk, Zenas Payne pronounced the words that made the twain one; then all halted, two with heads reverently bowed as they listened to the brief but fervent prayer which went up to heaven from those honest lips.

It was a far different wedding from that which had been planned and prepared for during the last few days, but oh! how much more joyful for Fanny! That would have been a woeful sacrifice, barely endurable to think of because by making it she would be saving a loved parent from a shameful death! But now—

A startled cry from the parson's lips broke that fond embrace, and the newly wedded lovers looked in the direction where his hand was pointing, to behold a red and steadily growing light in the heavens.

"Look! There's evil work abroad this woeful night! Fire—and at the Spider Ranch!" cried Parson Payne, in excited tones.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RUSTLERS AT WORK.

IN obedience to the commands of their youthful leader, the Prairie Kid, those disguised men who had helped form the grim court of Judge Lynch before which the Vigilante Chief was arraigned, separated, riding rapidly through the night, confusing their different trails as much as possible without losing too many minutes in so doing.

As already intimated, a chosen few of that squad had received different instructions in secret, and they headed for the Turkey-track Ranch, to there play whatever part events might determine.

The majority of the squad, however, took those directions in good faith, so far as gradually veering all toward the same point of the compass, with the Spider Ranch as a central rendezvous.

They were all fairly familiar with the lay of the ground, although hardly one of them could claim Wyoming as birthplace, and few of them all could actually claim a legal residence within its boundaries.

The little band was still widely scattered when those swift shots at the grove where Hards Knox had been left in bonds were fired, and though all ears and eyes turned in that direction, not more than one or two of the Rustlers made actual move that way.

For one thing, the firing ceased as abruptly as it had opened, seeming proof that all was over, whatever had caused the powder-burning. For another, youthful and physically immature as he seemed, the Prairie Kid had too often shown that his glove of silk-covered a hand of iron, for even those admittedly "hard cases" to lightly interfere with his plans.

And, as had been sternly impressed upon their mind before that cunning ambushade was sprung, Hards Knox and his punishment belonged wholly and solely to the Prairie Kid.

Still, if the young chief of Rustlers could threaten and punish, so he could praise and reward, and after that brief irresolution, the horsemen with hardly an exception wheeled and rode swiftly toward the patch of timber from whence those sounds almost surely arose.

The leading riders came up just as man and youth were abandoning their quest for the missing Vigilante Sport as hopeless; turning face in the direction of the distant Turkey-track Ranch; but the arrival of his men lent the young commander fresh hopes.

Openly making the division which had previously been made in secret, the Cowboy Chief bade the larger and less trusted squad ride with all speed for the Spider Ranch.

"If Hards Knox has gone that way, capture him, though the doing so cost half your number! Mind! I say capture, not kill!"

"But, ef he won't be tuck, so?" hesitatingly hinted one of the Rustlers. "He's a turrible tough hoss to curry, ye want to know, boss!"

"Surely there's enough of you to capture any one man?" half-sneeringly exclaimed the Kid; but then quickly adding: "If you can't take him alive without too great risk, keep on his track and mark it plainly enough for following at racing speed. Send word to me, at the Turkey-track. If I'm not there, I'll leave word where I may be found."

With these instructions that particular squad was dispatched at speed for the Spider Ranch once more, Prairie Kid waiting until they had ridden away before instructing his selected party.

The Rustlers rode on through the night at a good pace, no longer bothered with thoughts of how best they could puzzle possible pursuit; and as they rode on, some rather insubordinate remarks were made, while still stronger sentiments were more than hinted at.

For one thing, the Rustlers had much to say about the cowboy whom Prairie Kid had shot down while in flight, and whose uncared for corpse still lay in its own gore.

"Billy wasn't a giant, but he was too durn white for to be treated so mighty like a houn' dog: an' fer what? Jest that cussed devil, Hards Knox!"

"An' him red to the elbows with honest blood, too!" declared another of the squad. "Keel him over, an' the Vigilantes would

go all to pieces! But—no! The boss must have us all play monkey with my dear, sweet, darling little dumpling!"

"An' now we're to get the biggest hafe o' us all killed, jest so we catch the durn cuss? 'Course we'll do it, pards?"

"Yes, we will!"

Grim laughter followed these remarks, and so the squad of Rustlers rode on, straight for the Spider Ranch, with each minute lessening their already faint allegiance to their youthful leader.

As yet there had been no actual avowal of rebellion, but that would almost surely come, provided a sufficient temptation should offer itself.

When at no very great distance from the ranch buildings, some one of the party remembered what the Prairie Kid had advised as to the disguises worn while serving as Judge Lynch's court.

"Shell we shed the durn stuff, pards?"

But another Rustler quickly objected, explaining that in case they should find Hards Knox or any other at the ranch, it would be more prudent to have both face and figure disguised.

"If no see, no can tell!" he added, facetiously.

And so they rode on, still with faces hidden by black masks, and bodies rendered less clearly defined by those loose blouses of sable cloth, making no further halt until the outlines of the ranch buildings could be distinguished not many rods ahead; and then—Hark!

A hoarse cry came floating across that level, almost surely the voice of a fellow mortal in sore distress!

With hands on guns the Rustlers sat motionless, listening and straining their eyes, trying to make out just what caused that woeful sound.

Presently the cry came again: hoarse, yet cracked, full of wretchedness, the despairing appeal of one in sore distress of mind or body.

"Light an' hitch, mates!" muttered the one who seemed to take upon himself to serve as leader in the absence of both the Kid and Old Pap Ryan. "Thar's mo' gwine on yonder than we kin guess at a off-hand jump! An' so—it's creep an' smell 'er out, fu'st."

Swinging themselves out of the saddle, the heads of all the animals were brought together, a lariat passing through each pair of reins, then tied in a ready slip-knot.

Thus secured, the animals could stand at ease, but could neither stray nor break away in a stampede, no matter what might happen.

Crouching low to the earth, the curious and half-awed Rustlers crept forward, guided by those hoarse cries which still came at irregular intervals, and thanks to them ere long discovering their source.

They proceeded from the over-tasked lungs of Limpy Johns, the Spider cook and crippled confidant of Hards Knox.

The wretched knave still sat upon that peeled pole, leaning back against the fence in his desperate fear of slipping off his precarious perch; as well as to slacken the strain brought to bear upon his throat, by that menacing noose.

It did not take long to satisfy the Rustlers that there was no danger to be apprehended from that particular source, while it was equally as certain that Hards Knox had not fled from bonds to his ranch, else he surely would have set his henchman at liberty.

Having reasoned it all out after that fashion, and feeling convinced that the frightened wretch would not identify them through their disguises, the Rustlers moved closer to solve the rest of the mystery.

Limpy Johns greeted their coming with a wild howl of mingled joy and gratitude, at first not noticing their strange garb. It came near precipitating the doom against which he had so desperately fought for hours past, but he contrived to cling to his uneasy perch, begging for freedom, praying, cursing, laughing and crying all in unison.

The Rustlers examined the manner in which he was secured, and then questioned him as to "how came he so," as well as they could for laughing over his wretched torture.

Limpy told all he knew, as briefly as possible, then renewed his prayers for rescue, promising unheard-of rewards if they would

only cut the noose about his neck, and let him feel the earth once more beneath his feet.

But it proved all in vain. The Rustlers only mocked at his pleadings, made sport of his prayers, jeered at his fabulous rewards.

"Jest take a drap when ye can't ride yer broncho no longer, pardner!" mocked one of the Rustlers, turning away. "The airth'll ketch ye, ef the lariat don't stop ye from poundin' dirt too mighty hard!"

"That's what! Come, boys, le's see what's to be see'd over yan' way!"

Utterly heedless of the poor devil's howling prayers, the Rustlers turned away making a hasty but fairly satisfactory inspection of the stables and other out-buildings before entering the ranch proper.

By this time they were fairly well satisfied that only Limpy Johns of the Spider gang remained on the premises, and instead of turning immediately to the valuable herds and droves of hoofs and horns fairly within their reach, the lawless fellows ranged through the building, looking for and appropriating far more portable valuables.

Despite the fact that this was a bachelor ranch, Hard Knox had surrounded himself with something more than the bare necessities of life, and thus the eager knaves found far more than they had dared expect, when they fairly settled down to business.

During the search for hidden valuables, it was natural enough that the master's desk should be subjected to a thorough if hasty examination, and though no money and but little else of pecuniary value was discovered in either drawer or pigeon-hole, something else was: none other than the significant "black list" of which prior mention has been made.

He who found and first glanced eye over this list, with its grimly ominous heading, gave a cry which drew general attention his way. Then enough of the list was read aloud for all to learn its importance, and ugly oaths, threats and curses were cast forth, with the Vigilante Chief as their main target.

"Burn the cursed thing up!" fiercely cried one of the Rustlers, making a snatch at the paper, and in doing so accidentally upsetting the oil-lamp.

A flash of flame leaped up, running all over the lid of the desk, catching some of those scattered papers. A few wild efforts were made to thrash out the fire with hats, but that only scattered the blazing oil, and two of those cloth blouses caught from those fiery drops.

Then, amidst all this wild confusion, a voice uprose, viciously:

"Let it go, lads! Burn down the rat's nest since we can't roast the rat himself! It's just what ought to have been done long ago!"

Some one uttered the name of their young leader, but vicious curses followed close upon the name, and those leaping flames seemed to supply the lacking cue.

"Make a clean job of it, pards!" howled one of the Rustlers, who had torn off his burning blouse, swinging it over his head and then hurling the mass of flame into the room adjoining. "Set the red cock to crowing for break o' day, boys! Whoop-up and whoordy. Fire! Fire! Fire!"

It seemed as though a sudden intoxication had taken full possession of the lawless knaves, for they raced from room to room, up-stairs as well as down, spreading the flames wherever they passed, then outside to visit the stables and bunk-house and other outbuildings with the same disastrous results.

Then they gathered up what horses were handy, riding away to regain their own animals, while poor Limpy Johns yelled and howled for liberty.

"Shell we, pards?" asked one, checking his mount, irresolutely.

"No! Let him roast! If we save him, he'll only peach on us, the cur!"

CHAPTER XIX.

HARD KNOX IN THE SADDLE.

WHEN the Vigilante Sport caught sight of his promised bride in the very act of eloping with the rival whom he had every reason to believe was at that moment helplessly bound and under the watchful eye of

his crippled henchman, Limpy Johns, he seemed to turn fairly wild, and snatching a revolver from the belt of Tom Curry, he fired upon Perry Byrne.

But the hasty approach of the two men had not been wholly unobserved, and a second couple were trying all they could, under cover, to counteract that ill-timed arrival.

With breathless interest the Prairie Kid, from a distance which rendered discovery of his identity questionable, was watching those wholly unexpected events; and so it chanced that Old Pap Ryan was first to detect the approach of Hard Knox.

In an instant he realized all that coming might portend, and then he grasped his young commander by an arm as he gave hurried warning.

"Yar he comes, head up an' tail a-risin'! Shell I down him, Kid?"

"Stop him—check him—but don't kill!" flashed back the Rustler chief in like tones, then springing forward to cut across the course of the ranchman and his present mate.

Favored by their relative positions, Old Pap Ryan had the first opportunity granted him, and just as Hard Knox opened fire, he struck hard and sure, sending the Vigilante Sport headlong to earth, senseless for the time being.

At the same instant Prairie Kid tripped up Tom Curry, giving that human grayhound an awkward tumble which sent him end for end after first striking the beaten ground.

Thus both men were put out of the fight, for a time, at least; but others had caught up the cry, and matters seemed to go from bad to worse as soon as the Spider hands learned that their master had been downed.

There was precious little love lost between the employees of the two ranches, and from words it was very easy to come to blows; and then some person in the confusion fired a shot.

A mad, confused hurly-burly. Here and there a shot or two, although the majority of those seemed let off rather in reckless sport or harmless mischief, as yet. All around yells and shouts, cries and curses, with here and there a genuine "rough and tumble" fight between cowboys who had long been looking for just a chance to "play even."

Away galloped the lovers, clear of the confusion, with the gallant cowboys playing their part to perfection, barring the way for all others and so effectually hampering pursuit.

Nor were the Turkey-trackers alone in this part of the mad jest.

Knox had won the ill-will of many others in that region, mainly through the prominent part he played as Chief of the Wyoming Vigilantes, and now they were willing enough to help the Cowboy Lochinvar win his bride at the expense of the unpopular ranchman.

Thanks to this spreading sentiment Parson Payne was permitted to pass those lines, likewise, and then the "little circus" grew more and more animated, until it bade fair to end in a pitched battle where the loss of life and limb might be heavy indeed.

Then it was that Jerome Gillespie interfered, begging and commanding his men to refrain from further violence; and only a few seconds later Hard Knox fiercely called his Spiders to order.

Between those two that threatened battle quickly subsided, although it was but an armed truce, after all.

The Prairie Kid and Old Pap Ryan had not been entirely idle during the wild commotion, and now, though making little outward show, the Rustlers were in readiness to chip in at command, in case their enemy, the Vigilante Chief, should attempt to carry matters with the high hand.

Hatless, his garments torn and soiled, blood trickling down over one side of his pale face, Hard Knox pushed a passage through the crowd to the front entrance, pausing at the threshold for a brief space, eyes fiercely flashing over all inside the room.

He recognized Jerome Gillespie, who had retreated when the tumult died away, and who was now kneeling by the side of his wife as she lay upon a couch, nearly swooning.

"Where's my girl? Where's Fanny, old man?" harshly demanded Hard Knox, hand resting on the revolver which had never left his muscular grip since he snatched it forth from Tom Curry's belt.

Gillespie rose to his feet, shivering a bit as he met that baleful look, but then he rallied his courage and made answer:

"Gone—Perry Byrne carried her off when—"

"You've played me this dirt, Jerome Gillespie? I'll kill you like a dog if I find—"

"I never! Ask any one here if Byrne didn't swear he'd kill Fanny if we tried to hinder!" hastily cried the ranchman, twin color coming into his hollow cheeks at that harsh threat and insolent tone.

Proof was not lacking. Protests came from every side, and even Hard Knox was forced to believe that his audacious rival had single-handed and alone carried off the bride elect at the muzzle of his revolver!

While this by no means cured the hurt his pride had received, it in a measure disarmed the Vigilante Sport. If none here was to blame, where could his vengeance fall save upon the eloping lovers?

And they were off and away, with only the twinkling stars to tell the tale of flight!

For a brief space Hard Knox stood there, a central figure, and eyes turning from face to face as those eager explanations were offered. But then, when the exciting story was fairly told, he strode to the side of Jerome Gillespie, hand on shoulder and hot breath fanning that ear as he swiftly whispered:

"I'll have the girl, or I'll have your life; mind that, now!"

Without pausing for reply or further chatter, the Vigilante Sport turned and left the room, uttering a sharp cry as he emerged; a cry which was quickly responded to by the Spiders.

"Keep your distance, gentlemen!" Hard Knox harshly warned all others, armed right hand lifting to emphasize his words. "Don't crowd in where you're not invited, or there'll be a funeral!"

As the little squad was left in comparative privacy, the ranchman flashed keen eyes over them, then failing to note one for whom he was wishing in particular, he called out:

"Where's Yellow Jim Crow? This way, you rascally Injun!"

But the half-breed made no answer, gave no sign, and questioning failed to bring forth any definite information.

Some of the Spiders declared the half-breed had been on the spot at an early hour, while others declared they had not noticed him since dark.

Hard Knox gave a vicious oath at the disappointment.

"As a trailer he's worth double the lot of ye all!" came the far from complimentary declaration. "Here, you fellows, come with me. The rest of you scatter and pick up the trail left by the two horses. Work lively, now! I'll give a clean thousand dollars to the man or men who brings Perry Byrne back to me, alive or dead!"

There was a swift outburst at this loudly announced offer; Spiders cheered, but others giving groans or hoots of derision.

"Get to work, lads!" sternly commanded the Vigilante Sport. "If any fool dares block your way, or give you trouble, call out and he'll have to settle with Hard Knox."

Other sounds of disapproval, and again a fierce menace from the lips of the abandoned bridegroom.

"And, bear it in mind, every snarling whelp of ye all; Hard Knox pays those sort of debts off in hot lead and cold steel! Make the most of that, you howling, hooting, yelping coyotes!"

Drawing still further away from the house with the half-dozen men he had picked from his force, Hard Knox told them off in couples, giving to each pair one of the nearest three towns, bidding them take horse and ride without sparing the spur until their destination was reached.

"If they haven't got there ahead of you, keep all eyes open. Kill or capture Perry Byrne, as a runaway thief, and hold the girl until I can come for her. Understand?"

One fellow was daring enough to hint that the cowboy might have a body-guard of his own, and thus prove "too hefty" for a couple of lads to handle; but Hard Knox was ready for such an emergency.

"One of you keep on their track, while the other appeals to the mayor and marshal, in my name. If they refuse to arrest and hold, let that one ride back with word to me. Now—off you go, lads!"

These precautionary moves did not consume much time, yet when Hard Knox hurried away in the direction his Spiders had taken in search of the trail, that had been found and lay fairly distinct before his eyes as the ranchman struck a match and bent low to the ground.

The Vigilante Sport followed the trail for several rods, striking several matches in succession, utilizing their brief glow to the best possible advantage.

Then he drew himself erect, shaking a clinched hand in savage triumph as he cried out:

"I knew it! I knew it from the first glimpse! And now—now I have got the cursed fool!"

"What is it, boss?" one of the trail-hunters ventured to ask.

"This!" stamping foot upon one of those hoof-marks. "My black stallion made it! Perry Byrne stole Cyclone, and now—a clean thousand dollars and no questions asked! Kill the infernal horse-thief!"

It was no easy task to follow the trail over that dry ground, even while aided by the light of the moon; but Hard Knox was armed at all points, it seemed, and under his directions speedy progress was made.

They already had the general line of flight, and footmen were sent running on far ahead, aided by matches when necessary, while Knox and a couple of keen-eyed Spiders kept to the trail itself.

Whenever one of the runners struck the trail left by the black stallion, a cry to that effect was sufficient to fetch the regular trailers up to that point, when the maneuver was repeated.

As success seemed to be coming their way at last, Hard Knox began to discover how footsore that run to the Turkey-track Ranch had left him, and mounting one of the led horses, he left the men to pick up the trail.

Shortly after this there came a balk and a break: a serious one, as it appeared, too!

The trail was lost, and could not be discovered by those in advance, necessitating trying back: always an annoying necessity, and never more so than right now, when the Vigilante Chief realized how surely the lovers were gaining ground with each minute that passed.

Fuming, growling, cursing, he left the saddle to join in that hunt, when one of his men gave utterance to a sharp exclamation which sent the hot blood coursing swiftly through his veins.

"Found! Harkaway, ye devils!" fairly screamed Hard Knox as he leaped into saddle; but then a vicious oath hissed over his lips as he jerked up his horse, staring far away to the right, where a dull red glow was mounting upward through the starry heavens.

It came from the direction of his own home, and his own thought found expression in the words which broke from the cowboy who had been first to make that ominous discovery.

"Fire! An' it's at the Spider Ranch, boys!"

Even Hard Knox forgot the lost trail, just then, as he sat in the saddle, staring at yonder fiery beacon, knowing almost past doubt that it meant the utter destruction of his valuable property.

It was clearly evident to all that the fire had been burning for some time, since the lurid glow reached nearly to the zenith; but before further action could be taken, a clear call came from yonder prairie swell, and then a lithe, swift-moving figure came loping up, to pause only when near the Vigilante Chief.

"I was looking for you, boss!" he saluted, and Hard Knox cried out:

"You, is it, Crow? Where have you been, and what—"

"Tracking the ones you're hunting, boss!" came the interruption, and then the half-breed hurriedly but clearly explained his movements.

He had started off on the heels of Parson

Payne, suspecting what object led the minister to take horse so suddenly.

He had kept on the track until the lovers were joined by the parson, only a short distance further on. He swore that he stole up near enough to hear Payne speak of his own ranch, and declared that the trio shifted course, heading in a direct line for that place of refuge.

Hard Knox listened eagerly, fiercely, but with frequent glances toward yonder angry glow.

As the half-breed ceased speaking, the Vigilante Sport cried out:

"Here, you five fellows go with Jim Crow, and obey his orders as you would mine! Find those young fools, and take the girl: take her, no matter what the cost! Take her, and kill Perry Byrne as a fugitive horse-thief! I'll bear you out in it all, if any kick is made!"

"And when we do take the lady, boss?" asked the half-breed.

"Fetch her over to the Spider Ranch. I'll be there, or meet you on the way over. Go, now, and turn the trick without fail! Come, the rest of you Spiders; there's hot work over yonder waiting for us!"

CHAPTER XX.

CONVINCED AGAINST HIS WILL.

THERE was far more truth than fiction in the report made his master by Yellow Jim Crow.

For a minute or two after making that discovery, the trio, lovers and parson, sat gazing across the plains to where that ruddy glow was illuminating the heavens.

Parson Payne openly expressed his regret that such ruthless work should take place; for, rather oddly, perhaps, neither one of the trio for an instant doubted but what that fire was the work of lawless hands.

"There has been far too much trouble, already," gloomily declared the minister of the gospel, drawing a long breath as he averted eyes from that fascinating spectacle. "Hard Knox has made many bitter enemies by his hot partisanship, but—"

"If he was lying in the midst of yonder flames, 'twould be no more than he has richly earned!" fiercely muttered the cowboy; but as Fanny, his newly made bride, gently clasped an arm, he softened again.

Guessing something of what the young man must have suffered of late, the preacher refrained from reading him a lecture for the time being, instead making a proposition to the recently wedded couple.

"Come home with me, my young friends. Though I haven't much to offer you, still 'twill be preferable to a night in the saddle and on the prairie. Come, I ask you!"

He sent his horse forward in the right direction to reach his own ranch, and the others instinctively followed; but Perry Byrne was far from eager to accept even so friendly an offer.

Now that Fanny was actually his wife, he felt more keenly than ever the smart of fleeing from before an enemy like Hard Knox. It smacked of cowardice, and his worst enemy had never been able to accuse him of being a craven, up to now.

Something of all this he spoke, after they had ridden on for a few rods, and even drew rein as though he meant to wheel and ride back to prove his manhood.

But Parson Payne grasped his rein, holding the black stallion in check while he spoke swiftly.

"You promised me that you would avoid, rather than seek a quarrel with your enemies, Mr. Byrne! Now—will you break that pledge?"

"But—it's cowardly, man, dear!" pleaded the cowboy, his tones a queer blending of protest and pleading. "Surely you wouldn't ask a man to stand all the talk they'd scatter broadcast? Why, I'd almost be the cur they'd brand me, parson!"

"You pledged me your word of honor, Mr. Byrne, and I shall hold you to that promise," gravely declared Payne, tightening his grip on reins as Byrne tried to shake them free. "Plead with me, Mrs. Byrne, I beg!"

Fanny started and shrunk a trifle at that dear yet unaccustomed title; but then she rallied, begging Perry to yield.

"There would be a fight, and I can't—How can I even think of losing you now, my—husband!"

Only the keen ears of a lover could have caught that final word, but it turned the scale in the parson's favor.

Perry leaned her way, giving her a swift kiss; the uneasy horses would not permit more, just then.

"Well, I did pass my word, sir, and a promise is a promise," he said, though with hardly cordial submission. "I'd rather take a licking than to turn back on those scoundrels, though!"

"I know; although I am a minister of the Gospel, there still lingers in my nature sufficient of 'the old Adam' for me to fully understand your feelings, Mr. Byrne," gravely spoke the parson as they once more rode onward at a fair rate of speed.

"Still, when you come to weigh the matter calmly, dispassionately, I am sure you will agree with me that this is the right, the only course for you to follow after what has happened this night."

"Hard Knox will be doubly embittered against you now that you have carried away the bride promised him, and—"

"You surely know why, dear sir?" brokenly murmured Fanny.

"Well, not positively, but—perhaps I can guess sufficiently near to the truth for all purposes," cautiously answered the parson, touching up his nag a bit more freely.

A damper seemed to fall over the spirits of one and all, at that unlucky turn the conversation had taken, and for some minutes the trio rode on under the stars in silence.

Far away to the south shone that ruddy glow which almost surely heralded the complete destruction of the home buildings on the Spider Ranch, and though Perry Byrne viewed this with a certain degree of grim satisfaction, recalling his experience in the Dark Hole, none of them mentioned the matter again.

In a more genial strain Parson Payne talked to Fanny, tenderly alluding to her parents, making her see how joyous would be the tidings he could on the morrow bear across to Mrs. Gillespie.

"She begged me to follow and find you, dear child. She hoped that I would be permitted to utter the sacred words which would unite you in holy bonds to the lover of your choice. And she bade me add her heartfelt blessings to my own prayers, when once you were a wedded wife!"

His words brought tears to those big blue eyes, but they were born of gentle joy, not the offspring of grief or of remorse, and neither parson nor husband sought to check the dewy rain.

Mile after mile was covered at a goodly rate of speed, for all concerned were anxious to reach their present destination; and long before yonder lurid light faded out of the heavens, that destination was reached.

The door was opened for them by a wiry-limbed, shock-headed young Irishman, or lad, rather, since Tim Flynn was little past the middle of his teens.

Begging his guests to alight and enter, Parson Payne himself looked after their horses while caring for his own; but before doing even that, he whispered a few words to the wild Irish lad, which sent Timothy Flynn skurrying away to a station on the prairie swell, from whence he would have an extended view of the country stretching out toward the distant Turkey-track Ranch.

Under happier circumstances Zenas Payne would hardly have hurried so much in caring for the horses, for he was still young enough in years to have a very human heart, filled to overflowing with sympathy and love for his fellow-beings.

Still, though his absence was less prolonged than might have been wished, the genial parson paused for a brief space without the house, to cough and clear his throat before opening the door.

All was decorum when he did enter, though Perry was smiling like a man wholly blessed, and Fanny was blushing divinely!

It was a pity to break such a charming spell, but Zenas Payne could not well avoid doing so, and he felt that he still had a duty to perform.

While he was trying to select the wisest words to use, Perry Byrne saved him that trouble by speaking out the thoughts which

had all along been worrying him, despite his seeming submission.

"I'll never be able to thank you enough, Mr. Payne, for the blessing you have helped to bestow upon me," he said, one hand extended to grasp that honest member, its mate drawing Fanny well inside his other arm.

"It was a glad duty, my dear sir," replied the minister.

"I thank you again, but— Well, I've made up my mind that in coming peaceably this far with you, Mr. Payne, I've fairly kept my pledge! And now—I'm going back to the Turkey-track Ranch!"

A foreboding shadow fell over the minister's genial face, and he shook his head in grave disapproval before saying:

"I feared just that, Mr. Byrne, but I earnestly hope that you will think better of it. Wait: let me have my say out, I beg of you, sir."

Perry bowed submission, but his jaws were squared and gave little assurance that he would be convinced against his will.

Parson Payne rapidly repeated the arguments he had already used, but without avail. That smart was too keen, and Perry made answer:

"I'd feel like the cur they'll brand me, sir! And—now I've got more than myself to think of and care for, don't you see, parson?"

"Ay! and that is just why you ought not to return before the field is fairly clear," swiftly cried the minister, grasping the argument so unwittingly offered him. "You have a wife to think of: yes; but you are in duty bound to take thought for that wife's parents, Perry Byrne!"

"I don't—what harm could my return do them?"

"It would surely turn suspicion their way: it would convince Hardress Knox that you stole away his promised bride with and by their connivance! And—what would be the result of such suspicions, right or wrong, I ask you, Perry Byrne?"

Fanny gave a low, choking cry at this, closing her eyes and shivering as though she already saw what savage revenge the Vigilante Sport would exact in case his worst passions should be thus awakened.

Perry Byrne was far too young a husband to witness such grief unmoved, and as he drew the girl-wife to his bosom, holding her tightly, pouring ardent kisses upon her face, Zenas Payne nodded his head in quiet satisfaction, for he knew that, with such an aid, he could hardly fail to carry the point he had set his heart upon.

He gravely spoke on, showing more and more clearly how wickedly rash the young man would be to permit his pride to carry him back to the recent home of his wife.

No good could possibly come of such a movement, and the result would almost certainly be bloodshed if not actual loss of life.

Presently Fanny added a few whispered pleadings, and that finally turned the scale.

Convinced even against his will, Perry Byrne reached forth a hand, and as it was cordially gripped by the parson, he said:

"Let it be so, sir; but—what are we to do? Where can we go?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A FIGHTING PARSON.

HAND in hand the trio stood, just then, and though it really was a rather awkward situation, Zenas Payne showed himself equal to the emergency.

"With all my heart, dear friends, I wish I might say go no further, but remain here!" he said, with a sincerity which left no room for doubt. "If we had only ourselves to think of, that is what I would say, and insist upon your doing. But—"

"Oh, we really couldn't think of turning you out of house and home like that, Mr. Payne!"

"Don't mistake me, I beg, Mr. Byrne," came the swift rejoinder, that honest grip tightening. "I was thinking mainly of this dear child, who might be—in a word, I shall be most agreeably surprised if you are not followed here by Hard Knox or some of his friends."

Fanny gave a low exclamation at that grave foreboding, but the eyes of her hus-

band caught a vivid glow which hardly evidenced either fear or a shrinking from the possible affray.

Parson Payne read that expression aright, and quickly spoke on:

"If they were to find you here, dear friends, strife and bloodshed would almost certainly follow, and so—may I ask what were your plans before I overtook and joined you?"

Perry Byrne made brief reply, adding:

"We meant to strike the town from the other side, for I counted on Hard Knox guarding against our escape in that direction. Of course that would double the length of our ride, but our nags are good and we are fairly well used to the saddle."

The minister listened to this explanation, then bowed his head approvingly.

"I can't think of a wiser or more practicable plan; and now—I hate to seem like turning you out of doors, my dear friends, but time is passing, and there may come around visitors at any moment."

"It's cowardly to leave you to bear the brunt, sir!"

"Not so, Mr. Byrne," was the swift response. "Were you found here, a fight could not well be avoided, but if I can honestly declare that neither of you are with me—"

"If Hard Knox comes, 'twill be because he has sound reasons for suspecting the part you have played in this affair, sir," said the young husband in troubled tones. "And then your bare word would hardly send him away content. He'd—I really can't make it seem right or manly to go away, leaving you to face such peril, sir."

"Your lingering would only add to that real or imaginary danger, my friend, and for this child's dear sake, I must insist on your going," the parson firmly decided, moving toward the door while adding: "I did not unsaddle your animals, because I foresaw this emergency, so 'twill take but a minute to bring them to the door. Pray be in readiness when I come, for even the loss of a minute may make a vast difference."

This did look as though they were being turned out of doors, but neither husband nor wife for a moment misjudged Zenas Payne.

They knew he was acting solely for what he deemed their best good, and though the cowboy's face still betrayed his reluctance to again run away from his enemies, the young couple were in readiness for the road when their horses were brought up to the front door.

Parson Payne lifted Fanny into the saddle, holding her for a moment while he breathed a blessing and touched lips to her forehead. Then he gave Perry Byrne a cordial grip of the hand, sending them away on their novel bridal tour with a hearty "God be with you!"

No sign or word had come back from the lookout on the rise, and so the minister, still young enough to fully sympathize with those whose wedded life had begun so strangely, stood watching their receding shapes until they were lost to view in the distance, and all echo of hoofstrokes had long since died away.

Still nothing was to be seen of Timothy Flynn, and after a searching glance in that direction, the parson re-entered the house, crossing over to where a pair of revolvers, a double barrel shot-gun and a Winchester repeating rifle were resting.

There was a certain stern, grave expression upon the minister's face while doing this, which would have been a revelation to many of those who thought they were thoroughly acquainted with the man.

Parson Payne had hardly concluded his examination of the weapons when his keen sense of hearing told him some person was rapidly running toward the house, and striding to the door, he saw Tim Flynn coming.

"Faith, yer ahnner! There's a whole gob ov thim in soight, thin!"

"Coming this way, Timothy?"

"Yis, sor! I saw thim all av a hape as they crassed the ither roise beyant, an' thin—ow-wow! will I pepper thim ahl, sor, wid me goon?"

Dodging past his master, the excitable Irish lad grasped the shot-gun, breaking it down and thrusting a couple of cartridges

into the chambers, plainly eager for the fray.

But Parson Payne caught his arm, speaking sternly, to save both time and repetition.

"Quiet, you wild fellow! There will be no fighting, if I can avoid it, but at all events you must not fire a shot or strike a blow without I bid you to do so. Do you understand me, Timothy?"

"Yis, sor, but—av thim divils—"

"They are to be treated as friends until they plainly show themselves the contrary," gravely interrupted the minister, but extinguishing the light and closing the front door, letting fall the stout oaken bar into its iron supports.

None too soon were these precautions taken, either, for as the parson crossed over to the window, he caught an indistinct glimpse of horsemen just crossing the prairie swell a few rods away.

A muttered caution to Tim Flynn, and then the preacher waited in grim silence for the coming of the enemy.

Not for an instant did he doubt their being such. As by instinct he felt that his sudden departure from the Turkey-track Ranch had been connected with the flight of the lovers, and he believed that he would soon hear the stern tones of Hard Knox demanding restitution of his promised bride.

A demand was not long delayed, but it was shaped by the voice of Yellow Jim Crow, the half-breed trailer, rather than by the Vigilante Chief.

The squad came with a rush, as though determined not to give time for flight or trickery, and leaping from horse to ground, Jim Crow struck heavily against the door, as he called out:

"Hellow the house! Open up, or we'll bu'st yer crust!"

"I'd advise you to take second thought, before making such an attempt, gentlemen," coolly called back the parson, from his side the door. "I'd really hate to do any one serious harm, but a man has a perfect right to defend himself, and no less his house."

"Augh! Quit your blaating! Open up, or down she comes, parson!"

"Who is it you wish, gentlemen?"

"We want the girl—Gillespie's girl—and Perry Byrne! You've got 'em in hiding, and if you don't—"

"Neither of the persons you name are under this roof, sir, and—"

"You lie!" came the vicious interruption. "We know you lie! We tracked 'em here, and we're bound to have them, so open up!"

"Ow-wow!" exploded Tim Flynn, shot-gun in hand, fidgeting as though the floor were turning red hot beneath his restless feet. "L'ave me paste him wan, sor! Ownly l'ave me paste thim wid me schatter-goon, thin!"

"Peace, lad! And you, gentlemen, listen once for all," sternly cried out the parson, removing the oaken bar, opening the door and showing himself without a trace of uneasiness, although he must have seen something of the weapons which instinctively turned that way as he took this unexpected move.

He flashed a keen glance around, noting their number and bearing, then adding in clear, stern tones:

"For the last time, I assure you that the parties you seek are not within these walls; but if they were my guests, I would defend them with my life unless officers of the law should come to arrest them, with a regular warrant for acting!"

An ugly cry greeted that defiant speech, and again Yellow Jim Crow put himself in evidence, harshly uttering:

"He's lying like blazes, so—down him, lads! Down him, and take the others!"

A single shot blended with that savage shout, and Zenas Payne staggered back across the threshold like one sorely stricken.

With a wild howl of mingled rage and grief, Tim Flynn sprang to the front, firing both barrels direct into that shadowy mass as the Spiders gathered for a rush.

The gun was charged heavily enough, but with nothing larger than bird-shot; but that stung like so many hornets, and the sprinkled horses broke away in a crazy stampede, carrying riders with them.

With another wild screech the Irish lad fell back, to close the door just in time for

the oaken bar to drop into sockets from the hand of Parson Payne!

A streak of blood marked one temple, where that treacherous shot had cut through the skin and briefly bewildered him, but he was far from being either a dead man or candidate for the sick bay.

"Load again, Timothy!" he said, sternly, at the same time springing across the room to secure his own weapons. "They have placed themselves wholly in the wrong by striking the first blow, and now—take warning all!" he cried aloud as ugly yells and curses came to his ears from the outer air.

"Keep your distance, I warn you, one and all! Go your ways, and I'll say nothing of this outrage—lift hand or fire shot against me or mine, and I'll fight, fight to kill, too!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A LIVELY LITTLE SKIRMISH.

HAD the situation been other than it was, the newly-wedded couple might have felt hurt at being thus turned away from the friendly shelter where they had found brief repose; but they could fully comprehend just how remaining there might still more seriously complicate matters; and, besides, had they not each the other's precious companionship?

With all trouble behind them, with love and life together in front, with health and spirits and measureless love bearing them company, then, the newly-wedded pair rode briskly on their way, even going so far as to jest about this, their truly novel bridal tour.

Of course there was plenty of talk passing back and forth, but equally of course it was purely confidential, and hardly such as the general reader would care to analyze.

The night was still, the air pure, and sound travels fast and far under such circumstances; so it is hardly to be wondered at that, despite the miles which the married lovers had put behind them, and their absorbing interest in each other, both Perry and Fanny caught the faint sounds of far-away shooting, and reined in their horses with simultaneous cries of apprehension.

Not for an instant did either of them doubt the quarter from whence these ominous sounds emanated. They knew, by instinct, that trouble had come upon the minister who had spoken the words which united them for life.

"Those devils!" hoarsely cried the cowboy, wrenching his horse's head around as though to rush to the rescue. "It's Hard Knox and his outfit, and—I just can't stand it, Fanny! I'm going back and take a hand in!"

His manhood fairly revolted at the bare thought of pressing his flight while another was left to bear the brunt; and now there was no Parson Payne to argue his will down!

Fanny gave a low, quavering cry as she leaned toward her husband.

"Oh, Perry, my love! You'll be—those awful men will murder you!"

"Not if I can keep 'em from doing it, little lady!" with a brief laugh, as he met that movement with a similar one; then adding as soon as his lips were free to shape the words: "You'll be perfectly safe here until I can return, darling, and now—"

"If you go back, I go with you, husband!" firmly declared Fanny, giving her horse a touch of the quirt, heading in the direction of the parson's ranch.

Perry tried to argue the case, but Fanny refused to be separated from him, and there was scant time to waste in talking, if aid was to be given their parson friend.

Letting their horses stretch out in a far-reaching gallop, the married lovers took the back-track, Perry improving the opportunity by begging a promise from Fanny that she would go no further than to catch a glimpse of the house, until it was plain there could be no danger attached to a closer movement.

After making him vow that he would himself keep out of danger, Fanny gave the required pledge, and with a lighter heart the cowboy pressed on to the rescue of their friend.

Swiftly as they moved, they were in sore

danger of being too late in reaching that scene of trouble, for long ere they could expect to catch their first glimpse of the ranch, firing was heard, the heavy, lumbering report of a shot-gun blending with the sharper, more spiteful bark of rifle or revolver.

And then another red glow began to brighten the sky, showing only too clearly that the parson's enemies were getting the best of that unequal fight; and as he saw this, Perry Byrne urged their horses on still faster, smothering in his throat the fierce curses and threats which, only for the presence of Fanny Byrne, would have fairly scorched the air round about him!

With awesome swiftness that ruddy light grew more intense, and it seemed as though the ranch must be a solid mass of flame so soon, although barely a minute had elapsed since their first discovering the tell-tale glow.

Then, at top speed, the devoted couple gained the crest of the prairie swell lying directly east of the parson's ranch, and then they saw what had caused that brilliant light.

A load of hay had been standing near the stable, and running this fairly up against the front of the house, Yellow Jim Crow and his fellow-knaves had set fire to the dry grass, then running away under cover of the mass, yelling and hooting in savage glee as they waited for the heat and smoke and fiery darts to drive forth their victims.

All this Perry Byrne took in at a glance, and more; he saw that the hay had been ignited at the end of the wagon furthest from the house, the scoundrels fearing to expose their precious carcasses to a shot from the besieged.

The mass was all ablaze, now, but as yet the building itself had not ignited, so all was not yet lost.

Making Fanny promise to remain where they now were, Perry Byrne drew revolver and dashed down the slope at full speed, heading straight for the exulting knaves, beginning pistol-play the instant he came within fair range.

The surprise was complete, and as the cowboy did not spare his lungs in the least, yelling, whooping, shouting to half a score imaginary companions and urging them to slay without mercy, its effects were most gratifying to the honest portion of those engaged.

For, either driven forth by the suffocating smoke, or heartened by those ringing cheers, the fighting parson and the wild Irish boy rushed out of the house, adding their shots to the fusillade.

Yellow Jim Crow sprung forward to meet the cowboy, whom he immediately recognized; but it was only to go down in a heap before that rapidly barking revolver.

Then each one for himself, the surviving Spiders took to flight, no one thinking of or caring for other than his own escape.

It was a brisk little skit-mish while it lasted, but Perry Byrne felt heart leaping into his throat as he turned head to see—Fanny!

Unable to keep her promise while her husband was imperiling his life, the little woman rode swiftly down the slope, heading direct for the thickest of the fight, since right there she glimpsed her loved one!

Perry gave a gasp of terrified joy as he saw that no harm had come to her, but instead of returning his cry, Fanny pointed excitedly to the endangered building, crying out:

"See! it's catching fire! Can't you—Oh, Perry! must it burn? And all through our coming here?"

"Not if I can hinder, darling!" the cowboy cried, freeing lasso from pommel and riding toward that blazing mass, the black stallion snorting, but still obedient.

The first cast sent noose around wagon-tongue, and with an encouraging shout, Perry set the stallion to work, drawing the blazing mass away from the smoked, charred, actually kindled building.

But now the rest was easy, and five minutes later the last spark had been extinguished, and the friends were at liberty to take stock and count up the results of that little circus.

Zenas Payne was the only one on that side

who could show a break of skin, and that was a comparative trifle; but the results were more serious when the other side was looked into.

One of the men from the Spider Ranch was found dead, shot through the heart, while Yellow Jim Crow was found seriously, if not mortally wounded.

The half-breed shrunk away from them as they came to his side, for, true to his native blood, he believed they meant to put out his spark of life; but this idea was quickly dispelled by the kind words and gentle touch of the parson as Payne looked into the nature of that wound.

"How is it, sir?" asked Byrne, in low tones.

"The poor fellow is badly injured, I'm afraid, but while there's life there is hope. I am sorry; so sorry! And yet—God knows I tried all I could to prevent any violence!"

The fighting parson spoke thus in troubled, broken tones, his head drooping like a man who feels this loss of life rests upon his soul.

"They began the row, and—I shot this fellow, my own self, sir!"

Parson Payne forced a smile as he rose to his feet, and in more natural tones he spoke rapidly:

"Only for your coming, Mr. Byrne, Timothy and myself would in all probability be like these too poor mortals! I thank you for it, all!"

"Don't mention it, sir! What else could I do?"

"There is something else you can and must do, though, my dear friends," said Zenas Payne, giving a hand to each and closing his fingers firmly. "You must turn away once more, and never slacken pace until you are at least a round score of miles from this place!"

"What! And leave you to—if Hard Knox should come to complete what his tools began?" almost indignantly exploded the cowboy.

But Parson Payne was prepared to meet even that argument, and he spoke quickly, resolutely:

"I mean just what I say, my good friends, although it does look like driving you away in ingratitude! You must go, if only for Jerome Gillespie's sake! As for me—my danger is past, now, and this bright light will hasten the coming of my friends."

"Or draw Hard Knox here, why not say?" bluntly amended Byrne.

"If he had been coming, he would have been here with the first. And even should he come, I am armed in the right! But my friends will be here very shortly; and you must not be found here, to still further complicate matters. So—good-by, once again, my dear young friends!"

Unable to combat argument or resolution, Perry yielded, and once more they rode off, heading for the distant railway town.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BRAND PLUCKED FROM THE BURNING.

FEELING fairly confident that he could safely intrust Yellow Jim Crow with the conduct of affairs in that direction, Hard Knox set off at top speed in the direction of yonder ominous glow, followed closely by his men, each all eager to take a share in the sport ahead, provided it would only "pan out" according to the present prospects.

Still, it was little more than a forlorn hope, so far as the saving of endangered property was concerned.

The fire, whatever food was nourishing it, had attained goodly proportions before being noticed by Hard Knox, and the red glow grew brighter and climbed the heavens higher with each passing minute.

Mile after mile was covered without pause, without show of mercy for the animals they were riding.

There was still a faint hope; it was barely possible that the fire was confined to the out-buildings, or to the scattered stock of old hay and forage left over from last winter.

If so, they might still be in time to save the ranch proper from the devouring element; and with this thought urging him on, Hard Knox kept spurring his good steed, little by little leaving his men behind him, not one of the squad proving capable of holding pace with the Vigilante Sport.

On and on until he topped the prairie swell from which he could gain his first fair look at the Spider Ranch; and then, with a fierce, half-smothered oath, the ranchman drew rein.

All that was left of the recently valuable buildings was now an irregular mass of glowing ruins!

The roof had fallen, the sides were but glowing skeletons, and even as his heavily panting horse came to a halt, the weakened timbers swayed to their fall, sending up a swirling cloud of sparks and flame-tinged smoke.

It was all a scene of ruin and destruction. Not one of the many outbuildings had been spared by the torch; and as the ranchman glared that way, he could see the flames eating their slower way along the fences of the different corrals.

One after another the men of Spider Ranch came up, horses puffing and blowing, dropping flakes of foam and blood-tinged sweat. And as they took note of the destruction beyond, there were oaths and curses both deep and loud against the authors of that ruin.

Those sounds served in part to stir Hardress Knox from the half-stupor into which the ugly sight had cast him, for they suggested vengeance, if nothing more satisfying.

With all the old-time fire in his eyes the Vigilante Chief looked around to count how many of his men had fallen out in that mad race; and then he spoke, sharply, distinctly:

"That's devils' work, men! And, by the grace of God, I'll count out devil's pay for the whole job! Follow me, all who claim to be white!"

Without waiting to hear the ringing cheer which greeted that fierce speech, or pausing to see how many of the Spiders were willing to lend backing, Hard Knox spurred his horse on toward those blazing ruins, gripping revolvers as he glared around in search of the enemy.

He failed to glimpse aught human, however, but before he was nearly at the end of that mad charge, the sound of a human voice smote upon his ears, coming from somewhere near yonder burning corral.

A hoarse, despairing howl it was, at first; but then, as though he from whose lungs the noise proceeded had heard or sighted those charging shapes, the cry grew shriller, wilder, almost like that of a tortured animal.

Up to that moment Hard Knox had not given thought to the probable fate of Limpy Johns, although he had mentally cursed the cripple for letting their prisoner escape; but now he fancied he could recognize the cook's voice in those anguished howls, and guided by the sounds he was not long in glimpsing the poor knave.

Still clinging to the barkless pole! Still with noose around his neck, forcing him to sit painfully erect, with back pressed against the corral fence, which was now growing terribly hot!

The flames were eating their way in his direction, and in a few minutes more they would have forced the tortured knave off his precarious perch, to meet his doom by—

All this Hard Knox saw at a glance as he rode up to the spot, but he saw still more: saw after what fashion that lariat had been secured around the corner of the fence, and driven half-mad by all that had gone so crooked with him since the setting of the sun, he answered that gurgling appeal for help by striking Limpy Johns savagely on a jaw, knocking him off the pole and to the earth: for with that fall the lariat came away with hardly a perceptible jerk!

When Perry Byrne drew in the slack and made it fast on the further side of the fence, he tied the lariat around a dry stick which he knew would not resist the weight of an infant, much less a man as bulky as the crippled cook!

But Limpy failed to realize the full extent of that grimly practical joke just then, nor were his eyes fully opened until considerably later.

With a muffled howl of joy he recovered from stroke and fall sufficiently to reel and stagger to some little distance from the burning fence, then sunk down upon the dry ground like one utterly exhausted.

As his men came up, Hard Knox set them

to making a break in the corral fences to save what was left, but he took no part in that labor. He was thinking of vengeance alone, and made the circuit of the place trying to decide just who or what he owed for all that destruction.

The corrals were empty of all stock, but whether the animals had broken away in stampede, or been driven off by the Rustlers, he had no means of deciding, just yet.

There was nothing to give him a more definite clue, and so, as a final resort, Hard Knox turned from the ruins to seek further light from the lips of Limpy Johns.

Some of the Spiders found the cripple where he dropped from exhaustion, completely worn out by his awful struggle against what he firmly believed would prove his death through hanging, and already a few sups of water and a generous allowance of whisky had proved beneficial.

The tortured knave was sitting up, groaning and cursing, yet amidst all that he found breath for broken snatches of the truth; and the Vigilante Sport scowled blackly as he caught a few words those parched lips let fall.

"He tuck the Cyclone boss—he rid off, snortin'—an' ever sence I was thar—an' hit jest gone sundown!"

Hard Knox had left his horse behind, and now strode forward with a harsh salutation:

"Get down to business, ye devils, all! Scatter and look for sign! I will 'tend to Limpy until—Line out, I say!"

The men obeyed promptly enough, knowing from past experience that any hesitation would be dangerous; and the cripple shrunk shivering away from those glaring eyes as the two men were left alone together.

"What have you to say for yourself, Limpy Johns?" sternly demanded his master, hands clasped behind his back, as though resisting temptation. "Where is the man I left in your care?"

The cripple saw death in those glittering eyes, and the knowledge lent him a portion of the nerve he had lost.

There is no need to repeat questions and answers, for little was said which has not already been put on record.

Limpy Johns stuck fairly close to the truth, as he knew it, making even the ranchman see that he was hardly to blame for that escape from the Dark Hole, provided his story was accepted as truth.

In giving his after experience the cripple made it only too clear that Perry Byrne had taken no hand in the burning of the ranch, even while he swore that the cowboy had been head and front of that outrage.

Hard Knox would have been better satisfied if that deed of arson could have been fastened upon his rival in love; but he knew how impossible that conviction would be; long before the fire broke forth, Perry Byrne had been at work miles away at the Turkey-track Ranch.

This knowledge it was which caused his ugly scowl in first catching those broken sentences let fall in explanation by the cook: until then he had been charging the cowboy with all that ruin, but he could do so no longer, save indirectly.

"Who was it turned the trick, then?" he repeatedly demanded, pressing that point with savage impatience. "Didn't they say anything about Perry Byrne? Didn't they even hint that they were acting as his friends, or under his orders? Think, you infernal idiot!"

At last comprehension dawned upon that confused brain, and Limpy Johns huskily muttered in reply:

"I kin take my oath to all o' that, boss! Jest say what I'm to say, an' I'll stick to 'er through thick an' thin! Hope may die ef I don't!"

"All right. Keep your loose lip buttoned up, Limpy. Wait until I've more spare time, and—well, we'll see!"

Hardress Knox turned away from the crippled knave, and lifting hands to lips, sent forth a loud, far-reaching call which right speedily brought his men hurrying to where their master was standing.

Their report was necessarily brief: the hard, trampled ground in the vicinity of the ranch had retained no trail sufficiently plain for night-reading, and they came back no wiser than they went.

"It's the work of the Rustlers, beyond all doubt," the Vigilante Chief decided, when all was told. "It's their way of playing even for their mates who've climbed a tree! But—now it comes my turn!"

Mounting his horse and pointing off in the direction of Parson Payne's ranch, he savagely cried:

"Yonder first, my lads! I'll make each and every devil pull hemp for this, or die a-trying!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

HARD KNOX FEELS THE CURB.

As Hard Knox led the way from the still glowing ruins of the Spider Ranch, heading as directly as possible for the bachelor home of the Rev. Zenas Payne, neither he nor any of his present following had any idea that disaster had fallen to the lot of Yellow Jim Crow and his picked men.

During the mad race for the burning ranch, not one had noticed the twin glow which marked the heavens behind; bright, if brief-lived; and it was not until he had covered a goodly portion of that long stretch that Hardress Knox learned how thoroughly yet another of his hastily laid plans had come to worse than naught.

One of the fleeing cowboys fell in with the party, then riding at little better than a walk, so sorely fatigued were their mounts; and from his lips Hardress Knox learned of the hot fight at the parson's place.

The cowboy pointed to his own hurts as proof that he had not been a skulker; blood-stains liberally spotted his garment, although a closer investigation would have found bird-shot instead of bullet wounds.

And so, in a certain measure, Hardress Knox was prepared for what lay before him when, just as the morning sun came in sight over the eastern hills, he and his little force came into view of the parson's ranch.

But a measure of surprise awaited him, too, for he certainly had not counted on finding such a gathering of ranchmen and neighbors at the house; and his brows were gathered in an ugly frown, his jaws were grimly squared as he advanced.

Among the company there assembled he recognized the tall, stooping figure of Jerome Gillespie, but he looked in vain for aught of Perry Byrne or Fanny, the girl whom he had so confidently expected would have borne his name as a legal wife hours before this.

Although the arrival of the Spiders and their master caused a slight bustle and stir among the persons assembled at the parson's home, not one of them all raised voice in friendly greeting as Hardress Knox rode up, and few were the friendly looks, even.

The Vigilante Sport flashed a keen, comprehensive glance around over all, then lost a bit of color as he caught sight of a motionless figure lying beneath yonder tree; a shape disguised by the blanket with which it was covered over, yet only too readily recognized for what it was: the corpse of a human being!

Without word of greeting, without even a nod of recognition to one or all, the Vigilante Chief dismounted and, right hand resting upon the polished butt of a revolver, crossed over to that veiled shape.

With left hand he removed the covering from head and breast, gazing with cold intentness upon the face thus revealed the face of one of his most valued men, since he had been the least scrupulous.

The broad chest was covered with coagulated blood, leaving no room for doubting the cause of his death.

Quietly, slowly, almost tenderly Hardress Knox replaced that covering, then drew his athletic figure erect, flashing a burning glance around over all before parting his lips to ask the question:

"Who murdered this man, gentlemen?"

Until then Zenas Payne had made no move, no sign; but now he stepped forward, confronting the Vigilante Sport without show of uneasiness, in calm but fearless tones couching his reply:

"There has been no murder committed here, Mr. Knox, although murder and arson both were attempted."

"Who killed this man, my friend?"

harshly amended the ranchman, one finger pointing toward that corpse, his right hand loosening pistol in its scabbard.

"The poor wretch came by his death while assaulting my house, sir," gravely answered the parson; but as that weapon flew forth from its resting place, a stern and ominous sound broke from the lips of nearly all there congregated.

One stern voice answered for all, when it called out:

"Steady, Hardress Knox! Put up your gun, or you'll never pull on another man!"

Those big brown eyes glowed redly just then as they flashed over the gathering, and his lip curled in fierce scorn as he saw more than one weapon drawn and turning his way.

Never an inch did he flinch. Not the slightest show of fear did he betray, although his men recoiled, plainly losing their nerve in the face of such long odds.

"Keep your linen on, gentlemen!" the Vigilante Sport said, coldly, after that brief inspection. "Only death alone can make me put up my gun or drop it when I've decided to shoot! And—that you're all living, that none of you are making your heels break your necks, is proof sufficient that I'm not playing circus—yet!"

"Peace, friends!" gravely called back the fighting parson; then once more addressing the Chief of the Vigilance Committee: "And you, sir, hear me out before you act too rashly."

"Did you shoot this man, first?"

"Whether or no my weapon laid him low, Mr. Knox, I accept the consequences," bravely declared Zenas Payne, although he more than half expected those words to be rewarded by shot or knife-thrust.

With almost any other man, this would in all probability have been the case; but Hard Knox was clearly taken by surprise. Until now he had classed all "Gospel sharps" with women and other noncombatants!

"You know what that admission means, don't you, parson?"

"It means the plain truth, so far as I am concerned, sir. This poor man was shot while trying to kill myself and Timothy. I bear on my forehead the mark of one shot fired with murderous intent, as you may see for yourself, Mr. Knox."

"So you say, but—"

"And so I am fully prepared to prove to the complete satisfaction of any honest man," earnestly declared the parson, with a wave of hand toward his scorched and smoke-blackened house. "Look yonder, sir! This man, in company with others from your ranch—"

"Do you charge me with a share of the work, Mr. Payne?"

"I have not done so—as yet," answered the parson, making a brief but significant pause between those words. "But I do say this much: This man, with others employed upon your ranch as cowboys and line-riders, attacked me, tried to burn my house while it was occupied, and all this after being repeatedly warned away."

"They persisted, and in the fight which followed, this man was shot and killed, purely in self-defense!"

"Served him mighty right, too!" one of the ranchmen called out.

"So you say, but who's to know the whole truth?" insolently cried Hard Knox, his face flushing with growing rage and thirst for blood. "I ask you, all, gentlemen, who's to prove that this, my best man, was not foully murdered by Perry Byrne and this preacher?"

Parson Payne flung up a hand in warning as his neighbors seemed inclined to resent the insult in practical shape; then he gravely added:

"There is a living witness to the facts, Mr. Knox, whose evidence even you will hardly try to impeach."

"A living witness?" flashing a swift glance around.

"Yes. Come this way, please."

The parson moved toward his house, and after a brief hesitation, the Vigilante Sport followed that lead.

Inside, lying upon the parson's own bed, was the bandaged figure of the half-breed, Yellow Jim Crow!

That he was still alive, those beady, still

bright eyes gave evidence; and though he had long counted him as one of his most valuable tools, just then Hardress Knox fervently wished that the trail hunter had perished like his fellow knave, out yonder!

"Are you strong enough to speak a few words, James?" asked Parson Payne, bending over that bed of pain for a moment or two, his womanly touch cooling that fevered brow.

"Yes—for you, boss!" came the low, but distinct response.

"Did you receive any fair warning that I would defend my life and property, James? Did I not beg you to go away and try no mischief? Speak, my good man, and speak the simple truth as you hope for pardon when you go to your Great Master, up yonder."

And while the fighting parson stood with upraised hand, Yellow Jim Crow distinctly admitted that himself and companions had been wholly in the wrong, and had fired the first shot, struck the first blow.

He was going to say more, but the parson lightly touched his lips; but not quickly enough to hinder Hard Knox from knowing the half-breed meant to fully expose the part he, Knox, had played in the affair.

Parson Payne gravely whispered as he led the Vigilante Sport from room to house:

"You can't afford to defend their actions, Mr. Knox! If all was told the neighbors—if they knew all I have discovered—not even you could face down your evil deeds!"

Like one half-stunned, Hard Knox passed away from the house, to be met by Jerome Gillespie, who grasped a hand tightly while whispering:

"Flag of truce, Knox! If you bring up that old charge, I'll swear it's only to pay me for loss of the girl!"

Before the half-stunned Vigilante Chief could make answer or utter threat in return, the ranchman passed on, and then another figure took the place he vacated.

Hard Knox recognized Tom Curry, who likewise had a whisper stored up for his private ear; but this time the dose was far less bitter.

"Brace up, man! I've got a certain clue to the rustlers and their retreat! Get a brace on, and—hurrah for corralling the cattle crooks!"

At these words the Vigilante Chief threw off his depression, and once more looked and acted like his wonted self.

CHAPTER XXV.

A NOVEL BRIDAL TOUR.

THE early rays of the morning sun that fell upon the gathering of friends and neighbors at the home of Zenas Payne when Hard Knox and his Spiders first sighted the place, likewise shone upon another party, miles away from the spot where Yellow Jim Crow went down before the pistol of the cowboy Lochinvar.

Only a party of two, homeless, houseless, well nigh penniless just then; yet in all Wyoming there could not have been found that bright morning a more thoroughly happy, blissful couple than those: Perry Byrne and Fanny, his wife.

Nothing had turned up to check or hinder their ride after for the second time parting with Parson Payne, and without asking too much of their willing mounts, they covered a goodly number of miles ere the gray of dawn turned to scarlet.

Long before this hour came, the married lovers had made a discovery which bore testimony to the wise forethought of their good friend, the parson, and when they halted near a charming little spring of flowing water, Perry Byrne removed the parcels tied to each of their saddles, and soon had a cheery little camp-fire crackling and blazing, to heat water for making coffee in the tin cup supplied for that purpose.

Despite their long night in the saddle, and all the exciting trials which had beset them of late, neither husband nor wife showed signs of much fatigue. Were they not young, and healthy, and—best of all—together?

So far there had been nothing seen or heard to warn them of pursuit, and with scarcely a fear on that score, now they had ridden so far, Perry Byrne and his bride sat

down to enjoy their first meal together as a married couple!

The horses had been stripped and put upon lariat where they could feed at will on the fairly plentiful grass.

There was naught in sight to mar the almost perfect happiness of that occasion, and if Perry Byrne supplied far more "kisses" than "bread and cheese," will you blame him?

But then a change came, all the more disagreeable from its being so entirely unexpected.

Four horsemen rode around the near-by curve, and jerking up their animals with little cries of surprise, were at the same instant observed by Perry Byrne.

Dropping food he grasped his firearms, resolved to defend his bride while even a spark of life should linger in his body; but even as he sprung to his feet, the cowboy saw that his instinctive fears were without foundation, for neither one of that quartette was Hardress Knox.

"Go easy, pardner!" sharply cried one of the horsemen, lifting an empty hand by way of truce, though his other was grasping a gun. "Ef you're clean white, that's jest what's the matter with us!"

Perry Byrne saw that his especial enemy was not one of the quartette, nor could he recognize any of them as belonging to the Vigilantes.

All seemed utter strangers, and as Fanny drew closer to his side, in low, trembling tones begging him to avoid all trouble with the party, he responded to that proffered truce with voice in place of bullets.

"Of course we're clean white, but you—who and what are you, my pretty fellows?"

"Plum' white an' free-born, you bet yer boots!" answered the spokesman, riding forward with easy grace, evidently deeming all prospect of trouble at an end. "We're jest driftin' back to the range, boss; done made the drive an' shipped stock fer Chicawgy."

Perry Byrne was now fully convinced that he had never met any one of the quartette before, but that was not strange, considering the width and breadth of the cattle ranges.

The fellows seemed a fair average, so far as the class went, or else the presence of a woman placed them on their good behavior, just then.

Dismounting, and leaving one of their number to care for the horses the other three came nearer the little camp-fire, quickly if not curiously taking in all details.

"Looks like you're traveling mighty light, boss?" half-asserted, half-questioned the one who seemed generally recognized as spokesman for the little party. "Goin' somewhere, or jest doin' of it fer fun?"

That was a question easier asked than answered, under the circumstances, and though he had been expecting something of the sort, Perry Byrne was hardly prepared with a satisfactory answer.

A flush came to his cheeks, by no means lessened as he saw those inquisitive orbs glitter and grow suspicious instead; but before he could either bluff or rebuke this prying spirit, an interruption came which relieved him of the necessity of doing either, even though it brought a fresh and still more dangerous complication into the affair.

The fellow who had been given charge of the four horses, after temporarily hitching them, passed over to where the black stallion and the bay gelding were grazing: a perfectly natural action on the part of one who had so much to do with horses.

But there was far more than admiration of a perfect equine in the tones with which he hailed his mates, a few seconds later:

"I say, mates! An' you, Jo-dandy! Jest take a squint this yar way, an' ef ye don't say—who's black boss is this?"

The three cowboys instantly answered that excited hail, and hardly had those final words made themselves heard, when one of the men—he who had been questioning Perry Byrne—gave an ugly cry of recognition and rage, right hand gripping pistol-butt as he strode forward to make sure there was no mistake.

All this surely boded ill for the cowboy and his bride, and for a single breath Perry Byrne was powerfully tempted to jerk out his guns and lessen the odds by opening fire at once.

But then common prudence came to the front. He knew that these men were neither Vigilantes nor members of the Spider Ranch outfit. And, knowing that he was innocent of wrong, he felt that the wisest part would be to argue the matter, if only to keep Fanny out of danger.

All this flashed through Byrne's mind with the swiftness of light, and though it took scarcely a score seconds for "Jo-dandy" to fully recognize the black stallion, when he wheeled with flaming face and menacing weapon he was met by lifted hand with open palm to the front.

"Steady, all!" quickly cried the cowboy, hand on pistol but making no effort to draw, as yet, knowing that any such movement would almost certainly precipitate a fight to the death with odds terribly against him. "Give a man a fair shake, and if you find anything wrong about either of those nags—"

"Whar'd you git 'em, critter?" demanded Jo-dandy.

"Well, the bay horse—"

"Durn the bay! It's the black hoss I'm talkin' 'bout!" roughly interrupted the fellow, coming closer and handling the gun he had whipped forth from belt much as though his fingers itched to be working the trigger.

Fanny was pale and trembling, for she plainly saw that trouble was brewing; but true love lent her courage, and now she spoke, at the same time lifting an imploring hand:

"Peace, gentlemen! I assure you—if there is aught wrong, 'tis not the fault of—of my husband! He never—"

"Let me do the talking, dear," interposed Byrne, as he gently but firmly pressed the girl-wife back, leaving nothing between himself and the stranger who seemed bent on making trouble. "Now, sir, what is it that's biting you?"

"Whar did you git that black hoss, stranger?"

"Why do you ask, first?"

"I've got the right to ax, stranger, for that's my hoss!"

"Your horse?"

"My hoss! 'Twas stole from me, 'way down nigh the Texas line, less'n a year gone by! An' now—did you do the liftin', stranger?"

Byrne flushed hotly at that insolent question, then turned pale again as he noticed how the four strangers were closing in about him, but he showed no other signs of uneasiness, quickly speaking:

"Of course I didn't, sir, for I've got a regular bill of sale for the animal, and—"

"Bill o' sale be durned! 'Tain't wuth a continental cuss when it's give fer a stolen critter!" hoarsely declared Jo-dandy.

"That's my bad luck, not my fault," admitted Byrne, producing the paper which he had forced Limpy Johns to sign for Hardress Knox. "This bill will clear me of horse-stealing, and I'll either give you the nag, or its price, when we reach town."

That placable speech somewhat moderated the ugly temper of the black horse claimant, and he took the bill of sale, two of his mates coming close enough to peer over his shoulders at the same time.

To eyes familiar with similar documents, it did not require much time or a vast scope of knowledge to comprehend the mixture of printing and pen-work, but as their eyes rested upon the signature: Limpy Johns, for Hardress Knox: one of the other fellows uttered a savage cry and curse combined.

"That devil on ten wheels! Cuss him from daylight to dark! He's the man who hangs innocent critters for hoss-stealin', yet is a wuss hoss-thief then kin be found in seventeen States!"

Perry Byrne drew back a little at this vicious outburst, but as it was directed against Hardress Knox instead of himself, he still had hopes of an amicable adjustment, and repeated his former offer; pay for or restoration of the black stallion as soon as their destination was reached.

"Don't ye say yes, Jo-dandy!" cried Dick Fanshawe, one of the cowboys, who had been so harshly flogged by the Vigilantes. "Ef he hain't a hoss-thief, he's bin ketched with stolen property, an'—"

"Don't—oh, Perry!" just then shrieked Fanny, in warning; but her cry came too late to be of service.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HANGING A BRIDEGROOM.

PERRY BYRNE caught at a revolver and started to wheel that way, but before he fairly realized his peril or its nature, the fourth cowboy had delivered his treacherous blow, knocking the young man senseless to the ground, his pistol harmlessly exploding as he fell.

A cry of terrified grief burst from the lips of the poor wife, but before she could fling herself upon that prostrate figure, the burly fellow who dealt the blow grasped her in his strong arms, holding her powerless, while he called to his mates:

"Look to the game cock, pards! Bag him while you can, or you'll feel his gaffs—Mind what I tell ye, now!"

That warning was scarcely required, however, for almost before the brutally-smitten man measured his length on the ground, Jo-dandy pounced upon him, never giving over his efforts until Perry Byrne was wholly disarmed and effectually hampered.

Fanny struggled desperately to free herself in order to assist her luckless husband, but all in vain. Handling her with as much seeming ease, as though she had been but an infant, the burly knave bore her over to the tree-shaded little spring, then quickly tied her hands and ankles, at the same time gruffly speaking:

"Shet up, you pesky little spit-cat, you! Nobody's going to hurt you bad enough to warrant such a howl-a-baloo!"

"Perry—my husband! Oh, you've killed him! You've killed him!"

"Naw, we haven't killed him!" mocked the Rustler, half-angrily, as he wrapped her wrists and tied a couple of knots. "But maybe we will send him kiting over the ridge if you keep up that sorry tune! Button your lip, I say, unless you're just honing to be made a widow!"

All this proved too great a burden for one whose nerves had been overtaxed for weeks gone by, and Fanny sunk into a half-stupor, half-fainting fit which alarmed even that ruffian, until he found out just what that ghastly pallor meant.

By this time Perry Byrne was effectually bound, and now the other Rustlers turned upon him who had stricken the young man down, demanding just what he meant by taking such a course.

"Why didn't yer lift his roof with a bullet, 'stead o' hammerin' it on faster with yer gun?" viciously demanded Fanshawe, wriggling his sore shoulders, as his memory of that pitiless flogging was quickened. "Ain't he one o' them cussed Vigilantys?"

"Well, I'm not so mighty sure of that, either," declared the Rustler, as he looked toward the spot where Perry Byrne was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness. "But one thing I do know, and that's like this: the Kid takes a strong interest in the Gillespie girl, and as the girl claims him as her husband—well, there you have it!"

Jo-dandy and Dick Fanshawe exchanged quick glances at this explanation, and neither of them seemed fully content with the way matters were being shaped by their comrade.

"It's makin' a mighty heap o' trouble, when thar's such a short an' easy way out of it all!" grumbled the latter.

"What sort of way do you mean?"

"Hain't he bin consortin' with Hard Knox?" viciously cut in the ruffian who rejoiced in the title of Jo-dandy. "Even ef he hain't a dead-open-an'-shet hoss-thief, don't he pard in with them as is? Hain't he flashed up a bill o' sale from a cussed hoss-thief—s-a-a-y?"

"An' which is the sort o' stuff Hard Knox measures out to the like o' dum-sight whiter men then his mother's whelp ever dast to be? Don't he say stretch hemp ef hangin' comes less trouble, an' croak ary other way ef trees is sca'ce? An' now—that's my way o' votin'; jest dump the durn whelp over the divide, an' never say nothin' 'bout it to the Kid or ary other squal-livin'!"

Fortunately for Perry Byrne and Fanny, just then, the fourth member of the quartette sided with Jim Grimes, and as none of the party were drunken or naturally reckless enough to urge their claims with bullet and steel, a truce was finally agreed upon.

"We'll take 'em over to the camp, and then let the boss do the rest of it," declared Grimes, decisively. "Better a stake than a mistake, you know, pards, and the Kid has a mighty free hand when he's pleased!"

"An' a pizen nasty one fer gun or stick-er when he don't please!" Dick Fanshawe rebelliously muttered, but yielding with as good a grace as he could summon on short notice.

By the time this dispute was fairly settled, both Fanny and Perry Byrne recovered their senses, and as each saw the peril of the other, though their age and grief was acute, reason warned them to beware of unnecessarily angering their rude captors.

Putting this severe restraint upon his temper, the young man remonstrated with his captors, protesting his perfect innocence of wrong, but dwelling mainly upon the case of his bride.

For himself he would beg no favors, but he did plead for Fanny, trying all he knew how to lighten the poor girl's suffering, both bodily and mental.

Although he did not gain all he tried for, those pleas were not without a certain degree of success, and when the husband was bound securely in the saddle upon the black stallion for whose theft he had suffered all this, Fanny was permitted to ride her own bay, without bonds or further restraint than a lariat leading from pommel to the saddle-bow of the nag bestridden by Jim Grimes.

"I don't reckon you'll try to rack out without your old man," the knave drily said, as he mounted and started off toward the north. "And if he should be fool enough to make a break—well, the black is a pretty toleable runner, but I don't reckon he can beat a blue pill!"

That grim hint was quite sufficient to put an end to all immediate hopes of escape through flight, and for some little time the party rode on in silence, so far as their prisoners were concerned.

Fanny kept close to her husband's side, now and then venturing to reach forth a hand to give him a loving or reassuring touch, and lending still more frequent encouragement with her dear eyes.

After a considerable time had elapsed, Perry Byrne ventured to ask whither they were being conducted, but held his peace when rudely bidden to find out by his learning.

"We'll get there in plenty of time for you to plead guilty or not guilty to a charge of horse-stealing, don't you worry, pardner!" was the comforting addition.

That ride lasted until the sun was fairly crossing its meridian, but then the little squad came to a permanent halt in a quiet, secluded nook, where they plainly expected to find others before them.

The little valley was wholly deserted, however, and leaving husband and wife seated together, Fanny bound now as well as Perry, the Rustlers prepared a hasty meal, after which they fell to drinking freely, from a liberal supply of strong waters which constituted a portion of the plunder found at the Spider Ranch before the flames did their work of destruction.

With drunkenness came evil thoughts and reckless speech, until even Jim Grimes gave over his defense of the captives.

Failing to find the Prairie Kid and Old Pap Ryan, at least, there at the common rendezvous, the four Rustlers were not long in reaching the conclusion that Hard Knox had won the upper hand of them both, and that it would be the part of wisdom to leave, themselves.

From this the rest came easily enough.

Dick Fanshawe was the one to propose it, and he was quickly seconded by Jo-dandy.

"Whar's the rest o' us bully boys?" roared the drunken cowboy, half mad with rage and memory. "Who's done sent 'em over the range? Who's done made 'em stretch hemp, chaw lead or eat the knife? Who but Hard Knox, devil bust his uppercut? An' so I say—shet all the hangin' be on one side! Shet we rack out o' this 'thout leavin' even a note fer to tell the cussed Vigilantys how'd'y do?"

"Mebbe you kin chaw dirty dirt the likes o' all that, pards, but be durned ef Dick Fanshawe knows how! An' so I say—send that fernal hoss thief jumpin' up a tree by the neck, or durned ef you don't Lev to

fight me—which is Bully Dick, the Cock o' the Walk!"

Some of this came to the ears of the captives, and Perry Byrne made a most desperate struggle to break away from his bonds in order to defend his sorely endangered bride; but all to no avail.

Experienced hands had applied those ropes, and his futile efforts were cut short by the rush of those drunken ruffians who, yelling, hooting, mocking and threatening, grasped the bridegroom and dragged him away from his shrieking wife of so few hours.

"Shet up, an' we'll be back to 'tend to you, pritty-be-durned!" Dick Fanshawe cried, coarsely. "Oh, don't you worry, darlin' delight! Thar'll be 'nough left fer a dozen like you, when we git through with this high-toned boss-thief! So—jim-along-josey!"

Their minds once made up, the drunken Rustlers moved with dangerous celerity, rushing Byrne under a tree where a stout limb invited a cast of the never-lacking lariat. And as the noose came sweeping down again, it was caught and flung over that helpless head, drawn snugly in spite of the bridegroom's desperate struggles to break away or foil his captors.

"Now! Walk away with 'er, pards!" fairly howled Dick Fanshawe as he grasped the lariat and flung his weight upon it, quickly seconded by his comrades, neither one of them paying any attention to the wildly despairing screams sent forth by the agonized bride.

But then, all unheard in that horrible orgy, horsemen came sweeping into the valley and up to the spot, while a keen blade severed that rope even as the body of Perry Byrne was drawn clear of the ground!

With savage oaths the Rustlers scrambled to their feet, only to recoil in wondering fright as they saw the Prairie Kid and Old Pap Ryan holding them covered with cocked revolvers.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE COWBOY CHIEF APOLOGIZES.

"BACK, you drunken brutes!" cried the young chief of the Rustlers, black eyes flashing over that leveled tube as he reined up his horse close beside the fallen cowboy.

"Back, I say, or I— Will you have it then?"

Wild with rage at finding themselves balked just as they were tasting the first fruits of their sweet revenge, the Rustlers scrambled to their feet, cursing and howling, fumbling for weapons, and Dick Fanshawe drawing his in time for an aimless shot at Perry Byrne.

He had no time granted him in which to better his aim, for like an echo of that shot rung forth another, and the ruffian flung up his arms to reel back and fall heavily.

A second shot caused Jim Grimes to drop both gun and a crippled right arm; then the two other Rustlers shrunk away, begging for mercy.

"Take it, you curs!" sternly cried the Prairie Kid, waving his smoking revolver toward the fallen ruffians as he added: "Look after those two snarling knaves, and remember; the next time I pull trigger I'll shoot to kill, not wound or cripple!"

"An' that's jest what, dug-gun ye, all!" emphasized Old Pap Ryan, who had held himself in reserve, as it were, ready to down either of the rascals in case they seemed about to get the better of their chief.

"Look to the lot, Pap," ordered the Kid, alighting and with knife cutting the cords which held Perry Byrne helpless.

Half-stunned by his awkward fall when the rope was cut, Perry seemed to feel the need of that strong if slender arm in hobbling over to where poor Fanny lay in a swoon of fear and grief; but the Kid proved himself an admirable nurse, and thanks to his swift, shrewd ministrations the young wife was readily restored to consciousness.

Then, while Fanny nestled down in Perry's arms, he who filled the hardly enviable position of head and front of the Rustlers' organization, made full and ample apology for the ill-treatment which had been theirs.

While this was taking place, other horsemen dropped into the valley where the general rendezvous appeared to be, until the former quiet, secluded looking place began to take on the semblance of an extensive camp.

Up to now neither of the young couple had given much thought to who or what this rescuer might be, nor had they shown surprise at his manner of dress, but now Fanny showed signs of shrinking, and even Perry Byrne began to wonder if their case had been so much bettered, after all.

The Prairie Kid could not well help taking note of these changes, and a bitter laugh told that he was not over-pleased. Still, he drew his lithe figure erect, making a gesture which still further emphasized his peculiar rig; a Mexican *poncho* over all, while the larger portion of his face was hidden by a stiff, black silk mask.

The disguise left his round yet strong chin and full red lips open to view, and there was an expression of scorn to be read there as he spoke, coldly:

"Does it sting your pride, my gentle strangers, to know that you owe your lives to one who has cause to hide his face from the light of day? Does that mere fact brand me a criminal, or ever—"

"No—oh, no!" impulsively cried Fanny, with a protesting gesture. "I'll never forget that but for your coming— I'll pray for you, sir, night and morning!"

"And I'll be only too glad to improve any opportunity of repaying you, sir, for more than my own life," declared the husband, with a look at his fair young bride, then a shuddering glance across to where the wounded Rustlers were being cared for by their fellows.

His meaning was sufficiently clear, and he dreaded to say more lest he convey a portion of his fears to the as yet unsuspecting girl.

The Cowboy Chief nodded his understanding, making a covert sign, which gave the young husband some assurance of protection.

"The knaves had been drinking a bit too freely," he said, by way of partial apology. "And, then, too, I more than suspect that they mixed you two up with Hard Knox and his living curses! Only for that— But I'd be wiser, perhaps, not to talk much about those bloodhounds of the law!"

There was a brief and awkward silence after this, but then Perry broke it by venturing:

"If we only knew to whom we owe so many thanks, sir?"

A short, peculiar laugh greeted this effort, and for some reason or other the Black Mask found matter for a grim mirth in that wish.

"You are really curious to learn who I am, it appears, Mr. Byrne?" he asked, after a little.

"You saved my life when those devils had me foul," was the earnest reply. "You came just when I thought all was lost, and I was suffering a thousand deaths through—"

"Better not dwell upon that portion of your experience, Mr. Byrne," came the swift interruption, with a barely perceptible motion of head and hand toward the listening bride. "But, as for the rest of it: call me the Prairie Kid, for that's the title I'm sailing under just at present.

"As for what I am, that is not so easily answered; but of one thing you may rest assured: I am friend to all who hate Hardress Knox! I am like a sworn brother to each and every enemy the Vigilante leader has, be they white, red, black or yellow!"

Swiftly came these sentences, each one marked by gestures to fit, and none who saw and heard could for an instant doubt the thorough earnestness of the Black Mask.

So powerful was his emotion that he turned abruptly away, going back under cover and leaving the married lovers by themselves for a few minutes.

By this time the rendezvous had been gained by at least a couple of dozen Rustlers, all of whom showed more or less excitement over the recent shooting.

More than one grim and even menacing look was cast toward the recent prisoners, but neither Fanny nor Perry Byrne gave them more than a thought in passing. As the guests of the leader, surely they would have nothing to fear?

And yet, believing this as he did, Byrne was glad to see the Prairie Kid return, and shortly after he tried their fate, by asking how soon they might receive their freedom and a mount for the nearest town?

Instead of giving an immediate reply, the Kid looked toward his men, now growing

more noisy and restless. One hand mechanically toyed with the polished butt of a revolver, but the weapon was not drawn.

Surely matters had not gone so far to the bad? The Rustlers might growl and show their teeth in sulky mood, but that was all; and Old Pap was on guard; he would give ample warning in case serious trouble should be brewing.

Reasoning thus, the Prairie Kid turned again to the lovers, assuring them that they should be given both freedom and horses with which to complete their interrupted journey, but then adding:

"It is getting pretty well along, though, and you surely would show wisdom in waiting for a bright and early start to-morrow?"

"I'd rather not risk it, sir," decided Byrne, pointing his meaning by a glance and nod toward yonder ruffians, now growing more noisy and troublesome looking. "They're hardly what a man would select as guards for his wife, do you think, sir?"

No reply came, for the Prairie Kid was facing that boisterous assembly, red lips parting, hand tightly grasping butt of revolver.

There were ugly words and fierce threats being pronounced there, and now he saw Old Pap Ryan spring into full view as though getting on guard; saw that much, then jerked forth his pistol and flung back his *poncho* as he ran swiftly toward the scene, shouting aloud in stern tones:

"Steady, Pap! And you, snarling whelps! Quiet, I say, or— Hal!"

A burly ruffian sprung toward the old man from the rear, striking hard and swiftly with a clubbed Winchester; and Old Pap Ryan went down in his tracks like a man smitten by death.

Only an instant later his fall was avenged, for a bullet crashed through the ruffian's brain, and the Prairie Kid charged on the rest of the mutineers, reckless of the terrible odds against him!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE REVOLT OF THE RUSTLERS.

THE Cowboy Chief reached the spot where Old Pap Ryan and his treacherous assailant had fallen, but that was all.

The deftly-cast loop of a lasso closed over his head and shoulders, and then a vicious pluck upon the supple rope jerked him end-long to the ground, where he was pounced upon and secured before he could do more than fire a single, aimless shot.

All this the startled lovers witnessed, and springing erect, Fanny was encircled by one strong arm, as her husband sprung away toward the nearest cover, hoping to escape before the revolting Rustlers could give them further thought.

But it was fated not to be thus, and even as they broke through the fringe of bushes, a wicked stroke staggered Byrne backward, and while one pair of arms grasped and tore the shrieking girl-wife from his arms, another burly knave leaped upon the husband and bore him forcibly to the earth.

Five minutes later there were four bound and helpless captives there in the Rustlers' camp.

Old Pap Ryan was still "knocked silly" by that foul blow, but the others were painfully awake to the peril which menaced them.

Now, as before, Fanny and Perry Byrne were placed at some little distance from the main gathering, but the Prairie Kid and his half-unconscious body-guard were lying near the spot where both had fallen, and in full view, not far enough away for their words to be mistaken, or their full meaning misapprehended, were gathered the Rustlers.

If there had been any lingering doubts as to the full purpose of that sudden change of front, there was none now. This was a positive revolt against their leaders, in which nearly all of the Rustlers joined without reservation; although a few were courageous enough to hint at moderation in their judgment, their votes were quickly overwhelmed.

Foremost among those rough-and-ready orators was the cowboy from Texas, known to his present mates as "Jo-dandy," and his fiery talk was given even more than a fair share of applause, not because of its bril-

fancy or eloquence, but for the simple reason that it came more nearly covering the grounds taken by the majority.

"Whar's the use in bein' a feller 'less you're a fell-of-a-beller?" he cried, on taking the stump: a gray boulder standing near the center of that opening. "Whar's the use o' bein' a Rustler 'less you rustle some-thing? Eh?"

"You're mighty right, pardner!"

"Git thar, Jo-dandy!"

"You bet I'll git thar ef the brecchin' holds out, pards! An' so I say: what hev we rustled sence comin' up' hyar 'cept chuck? An' ef ary one o' the outfit hes growed too mighty fat fer his britches on that same sort o' chuck, then I want to see him!"

"Fat nothin'!"

"My pore backbone's rubbin' a slit up an' down my Sunday-go-to-meetin' in front! Chuck? I hain't hed nothin' mo' fillin' an' fat'nin' then shadder-soup fer a solid month!" lugubriously wailed another.

"Don't I know all that, then?" declared Jo-dandy, with swift nods of approval to all the quips and cranks, a bare sample of which is given here. "An' why is these things thusly? Why is it wharfo', an' ef not, why not? That's what I'm tryin' fer to ax ye, pardners an' gents!"

"You tell, Jo-dandy!"

"Jest ez easy ez fallin' off a peeled log when you've got a bottle o' whisky to yer lips, and a hunk of ice onto both heels! An' so—git a good ready onto ye, pards, fer hyar I come, red-hot an' still a-heatin'!"

"Jest beca'se we've bin led 'round this yer range like so many high-grade bulls, with a ring in the nose of every dug-gun critter of us! It's beca'se them as climbed up in 'thority over us, hes bin overtuck with a streak o' piousity, an' feel 'emselves too p'izen good to even let a feller look cross-ways at a hoss or a huff!"

"Sock in the gaffs, Jo-dandy!"

"That's we-'uns, pardners, an' how does she read on the other side? Thar's bin many a good an' true lad filled so full o' lead that he couldn't tote his load no funder! An' thar's bin some husky boys run up a tree without time fer givin' a last cuss or kiss-me-foot!"

"You know all this is gospel, gents! You know, too, that we hain't the sort o' hairpins fer to kick at gittin' pinched a bit, ef so be we hev a fa'r chaine fer to kick back; but—hev we?"

"Not a darn chaine, an' you know it!"

"Well, hain't that jest what I'm sayin'? An' now—I say it's 'way past fitten time to change bosses! I say git sbet o' both the Kid an' Pap Ryan, then jest turn ourselves wide open!"

"Thar's whole swarms o' money to be made, an' who knows better how to turn the trick then jest us? We'll sweep the 'tire range o' hoofs an' horns, run 'em to a market, an' then live onto the intrust o' our honest money!"

"That's me, pards, an' now—somebody else do the chin music!" concluded Jo-dandy, leaping off the boulder to make way for another.

There was no lack of speakers, and nearly every one of them followed the lines laid by the member from Texas.

Several openly advocated the hanging of the Kid and Old Pap Ryan, declaring they would have no better chance "to get their hands in," but this, as a proposition, was quickly voted down.

Jim Grimes, pale and haggard from pain and loss of blood, his broken arm rudely put up in splints, was assisted to the front long enough to make his speech, which was backed up by Dick Fanshawe with gestures, for his bullet-pierced cheeks and lacerated tongue forbade actual speech on his own part.

All this, with the added fact that to the speaker lawfully belonged the black stallion, lent a powerful influence to what Grimes said.

"We won't fall to hanging, just yet, mates. I say like this, put the Prairie Kid in the saddle and turn him loose! Let him go whither the black stallion sees fit to tote its rider, for—"

"No, no!" came an angry chorus, but a wave of his sound hand enabled Jim Grimes to finish his speech.

"You don't seem to rightly catch on,

mates!" with a hard chuckle. "I mean to hopple the Kid, and hide his face as he's so fond of doing! I mean to set him adrift after that fashion, to live or die, to fare well or sup sorrow! And if the boss totes him in eye-range of Hard Knox—well, I'm betting my good dollars that he stretches hemp for stealing the nag, and for burning the Spider Ranch!"

A brief silence followed the vicious prediction, and the Rustlers looked at each other, half-awed, half-pleased with the grim jest lying beneath that cold-blooded proposition.

Jo-dandy was first to indorse it, and as he sprung away to fetch up the black stallion, others joined in until there was no longer a doubt as to what would be the outcome.

Prairie Kid listened to all this (and a vast deal more which has not found record here) without flinching or sending forth a single protest; but now, as rude hands were fastened upon his beloved master, Old Pap Ryan fell to cursing and threatening vengeance, fighting fiercely to burst his bonds in order to save or to die in defense of his master.

Instead of either, a brutal blow from a club laid him out senseless; and then the Rustlers, now thoroughly ferocious, handled the Prairie Kid without show of pity or of remorse.

He was seated after the customary fashion in the saddle, strong hands holding the stallion in subjection the while. A length of rope connected his feet by passing girth-fashion under the animal's belly, while his arms were drawn behind his back and bound at wrists and at elbows.

This done to their satisfaction, one of the Rustlers sprang up behind the Kid, to place in position the half-mask which he customarily wore while in camp or elsewhere save while actually engaged in "rustling."

Then the black stallion was given his head, and quirts were raised to lash him away on a Mazeppa-like career, when a wild yell broke forth from one of the rustlers less busily engaged than his mates.

"The Vigilantes! The Vigilantes are coming, boys!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AS THOUGH RISEN FROM THE DEAD.

It was only too true!

Acting upon the information so opportunely obtained by Tom Curry, Hard Knox was enabled to turn positive defeat into seeming victory, and taking up the slogan let fall by the enigmatic cowboy, "Corral the Cattle Crooks!" he at once began preparations for a raid upon the Rustlers at their general rendezvous.

And now, yelling and whooping as they saw their stealthy approach had been discovered, the Vigilantes of Wyoming, with Hardress Knox and Tom Curry riding at their head, came charging into that valley, opening fire the instant they came within fair pistol range.

Already wrought up to a highly nervous pitch by the arts of those who wished the worst to befall their late leader, the black stallion was still further scared by those yells and shots; and when the surprised Rustlers let go their holds to think of their own precious hides, the burdened stallion broke away at a mad gallop, neighing shrilly, long mane and tail floating on the breeze created by its own swift passage.

The Prairie Kid made no attempt to check or even slacken that breakneck dash, for in his ears rung the clear, fierce shout of the Vigilante Chief, and through the eyelets of that sable mask he could catch a fair glimpse of Hardress Knox swooping down upon the Rustlers, revolvers in hand and spitting spitefully, long locks floating over shoulders, the battle fury lighting up his face and flashing from his eyes.

All this at a single glance, then the deposed chief of the Rustlers bowed low in the saddle, urging Cyclone on as well as unaided voice could play the parts of whip and spur.

On his part, the Vigilante Sport plunged into the fray as he ever did, glorying in the dash, the clash, the wild uproar which necessarily belongs to such a collision; but above all delighting in the danger, where he knew 'twas slay or be killed,

where his life was pitted against that of other men.

But he, too, had time for looking around, and he at once recognized the black stallion upon which his rival in love had ridden away from the Turkey-track Ranch in bold triumph the night before, bearing with him the charming prize for which he, Hard Knox, had risked life and liberty, if not his immortal soul.

It was only a glimpse as the horse burst away from the unnerved hands of the Rustlers, then vanishing from view beyond yonder fringe of trees and bushes; but Hard Knox saw that the black steed was ridden, and he felt little doubt as to that rider's identity.

"Down, ye whelp!" he fairly howled as he sent a bullet crashing through the brain of Jo-dandy, as the member from Texas tried to pay him the same sort of compliment. "Down, ye black-mugged imp, to keep your pardners company!"

This to another, as his horse charged on, and swiftly reversing his now empty revolver, he brought its metal-bound butt down upon that head with all the might of a steel-muscle arm, shattering skull and at the same time breaking gun so completely that barrel flew one way, cylinder another, leaving only the grip in his hand.

"Clean 'em out, Vigilantes!" cried their chief, sweeping an eagle-like look around as he swung his good steed to the left, having cut his way clear through the confused ranks of the enemy.

Hardress Knox saw that his men were surely winning the victory, and then he gave full rein to his own fierce passions, spurring away at top speed upon the still hot trail of the black stallion.

Through the fringe of trees and shrubs he plunged, coming out upon a comparatively clear course, and almost instantly sighting his game; for he held no manner of doubt that yonder fugitive was his successful rival in love, his escaped prisoner, Perry Byrne!

There was murder in his mind and heart as he thundered along in savage chase, reloading his pistol by the sense of touch rather than of sight; for he was superstitious enough to feel that he might lose his vengeance should he lose sight of his coveted prey for even a few moments.

By the time fugitive and pursuer had fairly passed out of sight of the Rustlers Retreat, however, Hard Knox began to doubt his good fortune; for yonder figure bending far over the black stallion's withers could hardly be the stalwart cowboy?

And then, as the fugitive seemed to discover that an enemy was pressing hotly upon his trail, that shape lifted a bit, and head turned for a backward glance.

Only a brief look, yet that was sufficient for the Vigilante Sport.

"The devil! Not Byrne, but—ha! It's the Prairie Kid!"

As he discovered his mistake, Hard Knox made as though he would rein up and abandon the chase; but now he leaned forward, armed heels nervously raking the sweaty flanks of his good steed once more.

The Prairie Kid!

The bare title recalled all he had suffered during that awfully long hour spent with neck in noose, momentarily expecting a horrible death even while his busy brain reproduced the black and sinful past!

It recalled all his doubts, his surmises, his fears and his superstition; for he knew that Bessie Black had sunk to her death in a watery grave, with the marks of his iron knuckles upon her pale brow!

And yet—surely this Prairie Kid was Bessie? Or—could it be her twin brother, Jesse Black?

Now the solution of all doubts lay before him, and with renewed ardor Hard Knox pressed the chase, his hot blood tingling sharply as he saw how surely if slowly he was lessening the distance between them.

Either the black stallion was footsore and weary from over-driving, or else it had been wounded during that brief affray. Or—was its rider willing to be overtaken?

Knox looked again to his gun as that fancy struck him; then he thundered on and on, gaining ground foot by foot, then yard by yard, until he could hail the rider ahead, bidding him pull up or taste lead!

No answer came in words; but that head

turned, to show a divided face, part black, part white. And then, as though feeling further flight was worse than useless, the black stallion slowed down to a trot, then a walk, and as Hard Knox came rushing up, pistol in hand, he stopped short.

This was in obedience to a command given by the mysterious rider, and Hard Knox shivered a bit as it came to his ears; the voice sounded so terribly familiar!

"Who are you?" cried Hard Knox, hoarsely, at the same time reaching forth with unarmed hand to pluck away that sable mask.

As the bit of stiffened silk came away, the Prairie Kid turned his head to gaze squarely into the eyes of his pursuer, and the Vigilante Sport started back, his face turning almost ghastly pale at the revelation.

"You, Black Bess? I thought— Can the grave yield up its dead?"

"'Twas poor Jesse you so brutally murdered that day, Hardress Knox, coldly spoke she who had played the role of Rustler Chief so successfully. "He followed after us, to guard and protect me, his twin, and when I refused to believe that you were wholly false to me—"

"He lied! I never was false to you, Bessie!"

"You lie when you say it, Hard Knox! Brother gave me unimpeachable evidence, and I fled in my mad despair—fled, leaving brother to cover my flight. I never once dreamed of what would follow: never once thought of his daring so much on the strength of our resemblance in face and voice and size! If I had— Oh, you villain! You basest of all assassins! You murdered him, thinking you were slaying me!"

Just then the ugly light of murder was beginning to glow in the eyes of the Vigilante Chief, and another tragedy might easily have been enacted, only for the thump-thump of distant hoofstrokes.

Looking that way, Knox saw Tom Curry and another horseman hurrying up, and after a brief hesitation he drew knife and slashed away the bonds which hampered the Prairie Kid, then swiftly uttering:

"Go, while you can! If caught now, you'll surely pull hemp as one of the Rustlers! Go, and— Go, I say, you infernal fool!"

"I go," said the woman, with a peculiar laugh as she set the black stallion in motion. "But, though I go now, we'll meet again!"

CHAPTER XXX.

HARD KNOX TEMPTED OF THE DEVIL.

As those rapid hoofstrokes sounded louder and drew nearer, Hardress Knox turned his horse half-way around as though the more effectually to bar further passage, an ugly scowl darkening his face as the two men came forward, interest and curiosity blending in their faces.

"Who is it, Knox?" demanded Tom Curry, looking after the figure on the black stallion, now just sinking behind a swell in the ground at no great distance ahead. "How'd you come to lose your grip, man?"

"Wasn't it the Prairie Kid?" bluntly asked the other rider. "I surely thought—it surely was the Kid!"

"Thought made many a nasty mistake, Joram Kintner, just as your mother's son will make a mistake if he tries to follow that person," coldly vowed the Vigilante Chief, the hammer of his revolver rising with an ominous click-click!

His lieutenant shrunk back, turning a bit paler, one empty hand flying up to serve as guard and as token of peace.

"What do you mean, pardner?"

"I mean just what I say—that the man who tries to follow yonder party on my black stallion will have to down me, first!"

"Say it isn't the Prairie Kid, then, Knox," began Tom Curry; but he was rudely cut short by the man on guard, with the words:

"I'll say just this, and then let fighting settle which man has his own way, gentlemen. Yonder party is a woman!"

"What!" in chorus ejaculated the surprised twain.

"That's what. She's a woman, and that ought to be enough for a hog. She was caught by the Rustlers, and if they didn't mean to hang her—well, look for yourselves!"

and he pointed to where the severed ropes lay on the ground.

The two men stared, and were still more completely puzzled thereby; but Hardress Knox had spoken all he intended saying on that particular point, and turning his horse toward the Rustlers' rendezvous, he said:

"Come, gentlemen; reckon we might as well take the back track."

In silence the others complied, and it was a very quiet trio which covered those miles.

Hard Knox had not yet fully recovered from the shock given him when he snatched that mask from the face of Prairie Kid, while each one of the other men were striving to find a plausible solution of that riddle upon which they had so recently stumbled.

If the woman had been held captive by the Rustlers—and surely those severed thongs, still retaining the curve lent them by the round limbs they had clasped, seemed proof of that fact—she could hardly be one of the outlaws. And yet, what a marvelous resemblance she bore to the famous Prairie Kid, in dress as well as general semblance, as they saw her ride leisurely away over the plain!

The sun was just sinking out of sight when the Prairie Kid rode away, and as the trio knew of no particular reason for haste, while their horses were worn and jaded, the twilight was rapidly deepening over the earth as they reached the little valley in which the Rustlers had rendezvoused.

Although the fight had long since come to an end in the complete victory of the Vigilantes and such members of the "law and order" force as had joined the committee for that particular occasion, on all sides might be seen grim tokens of what had passed.

Even in the dim light one could see where lives had ebbed out in a red tide, only partly absorbed by the earth.

Over yonder lay half a dozen bodies, covered with blankets and bushes; just enough to shield, yet too little to disguise the grim reality!

Here and there were less unfortunate fellows having their injuries cared for, among the number Rustlers as well as Vigilantes.

All this Hard Knox took in at a single sweeping glance; but in all he felt slight interest, just then, and his eyes passed on in quest of something else.

His ears were first to make the discovery, and as he caught the low sobs from woman, his face grew sterner, and he moved silently in that direction, to stop short with clinched hands as he saw Fanny Byrne bending over a prostrate shape, sobbing as though her heart would surely break!

He scowled as he saw her bend still lower to kiss the face looking so pale and corpse-like just then. And his mustached lips curled back in a savage snarl of hatred as he saw to whom that pale face belonged.

Perry Byrne!

"If he's dead—if he's only dead!"

Swiftly flashed those words through his brain, but his vicious hope was blasted almost as quickly as born, for just then the voice of Parson Payne came to his ears:

"Have courage, my dear child! There is no real danger, here. Your husband will live—he is not even seriously injured. See! a stray bullet grazed his temple, but 'twill hardly leave a scar, and—"

"Oh, Perry, my love! Oh, how could they be so cruel? How could a just God permit—"

A firm but gentle palm crossed her lips, and the minister spoke to the nearly distracted girl-wife as only such a man can speak.

Hardress Knox listened for a while, his hands working nervously, more than once fumbling at his belt of weapons, while his face was that of a murderer in wish if not in fact.

He listened long enough to make sure Perry Byrne was far from being a dead man; until, in fact, the cowboy lover gave unmistakable signs of recovery; until poor Fanny, forgetting all else in her great love, flung arms about his neck and fairly rained kisses upon the pale and blood-marked face of her husband!

Satan was knocking for admission to his heart and brain as Hardress Knox turned away from that scene, but he schooled both

face and voice as he passed through the little valley, talking to some, nodding to others, asking and answering questions in turn.

He found it had been decided to camp there for the night, in order to care for the wounded and to rest their jaded horses, which had, many of them, hardly known rest for nearly four-and-twenty hours.

Without counting those who had fallen before the rush of the Vigilantes, dead or disabled, something like a round score of the Rustlers had been taken prisoner, and presently the Vigilante Sport passed them in review, recognizing a few old offenders, and making mental note of new faces.

He looked for Old Pap Ryan, whose conduct during the flogging which followed the supposed death of the Prairie Kid by drowning had strongly impressed the Vigilante Sport, but in vain.

The veteran had made his escape in some manner as yet unknown.

As the night grew older, and Knox saw how completely Perry Byrne had rallied from that accidental wound, he drew apart from others, crouching low in the gloom, brooding over the situation.

What would Black Bess do, now her mask had been stripped off? Did she hate him as bitterly as she had vowed, back yonder, when his neck was encircled by her noose? Would she publish her past to the world?

If so, Hardress Knox knew that he would be ruined for life, so far as remaining in that section of the country was concerned!

And then—Fanny!

Long ere this hour he had expected her to bear his name, to be his wife! And now—the kisses of Perry Byrne were hot upon her willing lips! Her head was resting upon his breast, her arms clasped lovingly around his neck!

Satan tempted him; and little by little, that temptation grew stronger and seemed less impossible of realization. Bit by bit the Vigilante Sport yielded, until, finally, his mind was made up, and shaking a clinched hand toward the little shelter of boughs which had been rigged up for the married couple, under supervision of Parson Payne, the chief muttered:

"I swore to make you mine, Fanny Gillespie, and I'll make my oath good! I vowed to down you, Perry Byrne, and I never yet failed an enemy! I'll kill you, I'll have her, then—Satan guide the rest of it all!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE VIGILANTE SPORT BROUGHT TO BAY.

THROUGH the rest of that long night the Vigilante Sport brooded over his slowly shaping plans, now ready to take action, then forced to alter or abandon it entirely as he counted the chances for and against success.

But not once after uttering that evil vow did he hesitate or alter his main resolve; even this late he would defeat Perry Byrne and make Fanny Gillespie his own!

Only a madman could have formed so wildly desperate a resolve, and thought it possible to escape from so many with both life and prize: but the Vigilante Chief was hardly a lunatic, just then, though fully as far beyond the control of sober reason.

No sleep visited his eyes during all those hours, and more than once he was astir, prowling here and there, his movements noticed, but always covered by his office as commander of the forces.

More than once he crept close up to that rude little brush shelter within which the objects of his mad passions were then resting.

More than once he gripped weapon tightly, tingling from head to foot with the temptation to leap upon his prey, to kill one and bear the other off in his arms, defiant alike of her shrieks and the shots which would come after him from the weapons of his own men.

But, just as often, a ray of cooler reason came to the front, and he stole away to renew his plotting and planning, through all of which only one thing was clear and distinct: he would win, despite all odds!

Long before the day dawned, Hardress Knox led his horse apart from the others,

saddling and bridling him, making all ready for the road.

The noble creature had recovered from his hard work of the past day and night, and with anything like a fair start, the Vigilante Sport felt fairly assured that he could hold his own against all odds.

It was not until the sun was beginning to show itself, and the camp was all life and bustle, busy hands preparing the morning meal from a stock of provisions laid in by the Rustlers, that Hard Knox found even the ghost of a chance to claim his prize.

Fanny Byrne, pale, and showing traces of past fatigue and sore anxiety, but looking even more charming in those covetous eyes, left the little hut and passed over to the spring.

Hard Knox was partly hidden by a clump of bushes, and the girl-wife never so much as suspected his vicinity as she stooped to the sparkling water.

He saw his chance, but hesitated before improving it. Perry Byrne had left the hut before his bride, and was not now within eye range. If he only had been!

The Vigilante Sport breathed an execration as he thought of this—a sound loud enough to draw Fanny's eyes [that way, and then she sprung erect as she caught sight of that evilly handsome visage.

A scream of fright was rising to her lips, but Hard Knox knew how surely fatal that would be to all his mad hopes, and with a bound he covered the space between, grasping her in arms, choking off that shriek before it could find full utterance.

"Quiet, you fool!" he said, fiercely, as he rushed across to where his good horse had been left in waiting. "Give a yelp and it'll draw Perry Byrne to meet his death!"

It was a feat which few men could successfully perform, but just then Hard Knox was gifted with abnormal strength and activity, and he swung his captive around, at the same time springing bodily into the saddle, then raking those flanks viciously with his spurs; for, just then poor Fanny gave a wild shriek of terror!

An instant later the bold abductor was off and away, covered from view and protected from shot by those clustering trees; but the alarm had been taken, and more than one pair of startled eyes had glimpsed the doubly burdened horse as it broke away in headlong flight.

All was seeming confusion and wildest excitement, but from disorder came quick pursuit with honest men in the saddle who meant to save the endangered girl-wife even at the cost of their own lives.

In the front rode Perry Byrne, Parson Payne, Tom Curry and Jerome Gillespie, each man mounted upon the animal which had come first to hand, some with a bridle, others with barely a halter or trail-rope, while not one had a saddle.

Hard Knox had made the most of his start, and despite the fact that his horse had an unusual burden to bear, he more than held his own during those first few miles.

For one thing, the Vigilante Sport was a superb horseman, up to every trick and device by which a good steed can be made to appear far better; and now he had a thoroughbred beneath him, such as a man might well risk life and fortune upon.

He was already beyond pistol range when the pursuers first caught a fair sight of him, and from that time on he shaped his flight with an eye to that point, improving every bit of cover he could, yet far too cool-headed as yet to once give chance for his enemies to gain in distance by taking a short cut.

Still, the odds were too great for any man to successfully combat, and as time passed on, as mile after mile was placed between those swiftly-flying heels, the Vigilante Sport began to realize that the ending was a mere question of time.

His gallant steed was beginning to labor under that heavy double weight. Its footing became less sure when rough ground had to be negotiated, and more than once it stumbled; sure sign of exhaustion!

With a grim rage glowing in eyes and lining his unusually pale face, the Vigilante Sport looked backward.

The chase had long since grown scattered and strung out, but enough armed men were in sight to render a fight against such odds

no better than suicide; but he could see nothing whatever of Perry Byrne!

If the cowboy had been among the leaders, it is more than possible that the abductor would have thrown away his own life in his mad thirst for that of his successful rival; but now, he would race to the bitter end, and then—die in good company!

Strangely enough, yet easily accounted for when the course he had been forced to take is considered, Hard Knox was now just entering the little oval valley where the Vigilantes under his lead surprised the Prairie Kid and drove him to a seeming death by drowning.

And, another coincidence: he had hardly reached the little clump of trees which marked the broken camp, the pitiless flogging, the bitter grief of Old Pap Ryan, when he drew rein with a hoarse cry and savage curse; for yonder, just coming into view at the other end of the valley, he sighted armed horsemen blocking his further flight!

One look backward convinced him that retreat was impossible, and, after a brief hesitation, he rode straight for the high bank which rose above yonder sunken river, jumping out of the saddle and taking the nearly-insensible girl-wife with him.

"Back, ye whelps of Satan!" he thundered, holding the girl on one arm, while he drew a revolver with his right hand. "Back, I say, or— Keep your distance, or I'll kill the girl!"

A hoarse, inarticulate cry broke from the fear-blanching lips of Jerome Gillespie, who was among the foremost of those pursuers, and weapons dropped from his hands, as he flung them wide, as though to bar the further passage of all others.

As he saw this, Hard Knox laughed recklessly, for he felt that he was still a man among men, still one to command and be obeyed!

Until then he had abandoned all hope of escape with life, but now he began to wonder if, after all, he could not brazen his way through, even taking the girl with him!

It was a wild, preposterous idea, but as no other hope of escape could be seen, he caught at it quickly.

"Back, I warn ye, men!" he cried again, his tones full of deadly resolution as he shook that armed hand fiercely toward the checked rescuers, then turned the weapon toward the besom of the helpless girl. "If you try to crowd the mourners, I'll give you food fit for a funeral feast!"

"Hold, you devil!" shouted Jerome Gillespie. "Harm my girl, and I'll murder you by inches! Let her go, man, and you may go free!"

"We go in company, or not at all!" boldly vowed the cornered desperado, his newborn hopes strengthened by that quick concession. "Fall back, ye snarling coyotes! Leave the road clear for your master! Fall back, I say, or I'll—"

From the rocks upon the high ground forming the northern boundary to the little valley, rung forth a single rifle-shot, and, with an almost human scream of pain, the horse so recently ridden by the Vigilante Sport, reared up, pawing wildly for a few seconds, then plunging blindly forward to pitch headlong over the bank, into the river below!

Startled, Hard Knox flashed look from horse to hill, marking there the little curl of blue vapor, but failing to see more.

He shrunk a trifle at this, for the next shot might be aimed just as surely at his own heart or brain!

That fear passed as swiftly as it came, and swinging the girl-wife around so that her body would partially shield his own, he cried aloud:

"Ye cowardly whelps! Twenty to one, yet ye fear to come like men, but hide in ambush and play the bushwhacker! Bah! I spit upon you!"

"Don't be all fool, Hard Knox!" cried back Gillespie, still thinking only how his child might be saved. "Let Fanny go, and—"

With a fierce laugh Hard Knox stepped nearer the brink, at the same time shouting, fiercely:

"Let her go? Ay! she goes with me! And, why not? As well die now and here, as live to be hanged! Come, Fanny, my love! We'll cheat the whole gang, even

yet! Come, and we'll go down to death, together!"

But, even as he spoke, another shot came from the rocks, and he fell in his tracks, with bullet pierced brain!

CHAPTER XXXII.

A GENERAL ROUND-UP.

WHETHER the Vigilante Sport really meant to hurl Fanny over to meet death in the waters below, or was merely trying to bluff his enemies, will never be known for certain.

That death-shot checked his mad movement, and as he fell his grasp was broken, and Fanny fled, shrieking, to the arms of her father.

Then a cry of excited interest burst from more than one of the rescuers as they recognized a swiftly-moving figure, and Tom Curry pealed forth a name as he sprung forward: a name grown familiar to all ears then within hearing.

"The Prairie Kid! Stop! I arrest you, in the name of the law!"

She who had figured as chief of the cowboys for so long, looked around to see armed men closing in as though to take possession of both living and dead!

Springing to her feet, she dragged all that was left of Hard Knox to the brink, then clasped the body in her arms and flung both dead and living over the escarpment!

And, just as he had done once before, poor Old Pap Ryan shortly after was bending over that bank, peering through tear-dimmed eyes for the loved mistress whom he was fated never more to see in life.

Perry Byrne came up to the oval valley, on foot, bruised and bleeding from the fall which had crippled his horse; but, what cared he for all the rest, when Fanny rushed to meet him, alive, unharmed, more precious in his eyes than ever before!

After a long search down there where the shadowed waters flowed so silently, a heavy burden was brought to shore by the searchers, and with a moan of bitterest anguish Old Pap Ryan crawled forward to kiss the death-blanching lips of his idolized young mistress.

Then, bit by bit the story of the sad and tragic past was elicited from Old Pap, and when all present knew that this twain had once been lovers, a grave was dug there under the trees, and Parson Payne preached a brief, eloquent funeral sermon over the erring couple.

There were few dry eyes to be seen when his prayer came to an end, and fewer still when Old Pap had to be held back from flinging himself into the grave, so intense was his grief.

When the dead were hidden from view, and the clouds neatly rounded over, Parson Payne took especial charge of Ryan, gently leading him away, taking him home, hoping there to win him back to a christian life.

But, it was not to be. That same night the old man contrived to escape from the house, and when searched for, was found late the next day, lying across that grave, a bullet-hole in his temple.

Since his master was dead and gone, Limpy Johns was readily induced to make full confession in regard to the proofs manufactured by Hard Knox through which he hoped to eventually hang Perry Byrne as a horse-thief.

Even without that confession, no doubt the ex-cowboy would have been fully acquitted of all wrong-doing in the eyes and estimation of the public; but that satisfactory confirmation of general belief did not come amiss.

Another surprise was sprung by Tom Curry, who was at last convinced that his suspicions were correct; for he addressed Perry Byrne as Frank McBride, then told how he had been working for a full year trying to locate the runaway son of a millionaire, the father having long since sorely repented the harsh treatment which sent his boy away, drifting on the tide which

has so often brought gallant craft to wreck and ruin.

Fanny felt just a wee bit awed when she learned how wealthy her cowboy husband bade fair to become; but then her courage returned, for he was still her own dear Perry—the gallant lad who had won her at the muzzle of his revolvers!

Jerome Gillespie lived a happier life after the death of his persecutors; all proofs—those real or manufactured—of past crimes or law-breakings had vanished with the Spider Ranch, never more to arise and haunt his waking or sleeping hours.

Honest Mark Diggs still lives on the Turkey-track Ranch, and "the fighting parson" remains a bachelor, still!

Yellow Jim Crow recovered from his injuries, and drifted away, to be lost sight of by those more intimately connected with this story.

THE END.

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Goes It Alone on a Bluff Hand!

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